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Abstract
Urban Dreams and Agrarian Renovations:
Examining the Politics and Practices of Peri-urban Land Conversion in Hanoi, Vietnam

Emily M. Nguyen
2021

In Mễ Trì village on the Western peri-urban edge of Hanoi, Vietnam, landless rice farmers no longer tend to rice paddy fields. Instead, many have converted 40 square meters of their residential space into a small factory for producing an artisanal rice product called *cốm* (young rice). This small village-based industry has garnered national demand for the product, drawing the attention of central policymakers who want to preserve the craft as a cultural relic of Hanoi. But without land to cultivate the rice inputs, young rice production is largely driven by the outsourcing of grains, the use of inventive new machinery, and most notably, widespread sentiments of pride and passion in the village craft. Based on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Mễ Trì village between July 2017 and December 2018, this dissertation examines the assemblages of rural-urban spaces that emerge out of the convergence of mega-city master plans, foreign investment, heritage preservation, and the everyday livelihood practices of those living and working in the changing urban fringe. It attends to competing discourses on Vietnam's rural spaces as well as the dialogic practices between state actors and local *cốm* producers, which have allowed agrarian traditions to re-emerge amidst urban development.

In this dissertation, I argue that Mễ Trì's practices of adaptation through craft production demonstrate a politics of resilience, which has both material and symbolic implications. Craft production not only provides people with a transitional livelihood in their post-agrarian landscape, but it has also served as an important cultural tool and resource that villagers use in finding and cultivating meaningful identities amidst society's contemporary urban-oriented shifts. Stories about Mễ Trì's acts of resilience through *cốm* production narrate the lived experiences of land use and social transformation of a village that lies, both empirically as well as conceptually, at the tenuous intersection between a capital mega-city's dual projects of urban civilization (*văn minh đô thị*) and "heritage" protection. In doing so, it provides an ethnographic insight into the shifting but continually significant place of agrarian-based cultures and livelihoods in shaping the broader processes of urban-oriented economic and land use change in Hanoi, with implications for other Asian contexts.

Urban Dreams and Agrarian Renovations:
Examining the Politics and Practices of Peri-urban Land Conversion in Hanoi, Vietnam

A Dissertation
Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of
Yale University
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Emily M. Nguyen

Dissertation Director: Erik Harms

June 2021

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Introduction- Crafting Rural Identities in Urban Spaces: Heritage and Development in Mễ Trì, Hanoi City

Thatched Sidewalks on Urban Land

Along a sidewalk in Hanoi's Mễ Trì¹ Urban Ward, just outside the gates of new and immaculately constructed villa homes, there is a carefully laid out row of green rice straw stretching down a length of at least thirty feet, completely blanketing the scorching hot cement walkway [Images 1-2]. The rows of straw have been drying there, underneath Hanoi's blinding August sun, for at least twenty-four hours, but they have been left untouched by all those passing by. Even the local cadres and policemen, and the villa community's sleepy security guards, who use the sidewalks on their way to get lunch, do not seem to take much notice of the thatched sheet of green that has taken over the pavement. Like everyone else, they simply walk around it, stepping off the curb as not to disturb the sunbathing stalks. In explaining to me why the rice straws are allowed to linger on the sidewalks, right in the path of the villa residents and urban pedestrians, my local guide, Dung, the Youth Union Secretary at Mễ Trì's People's Committee, responds, matter-of-factly that, "Of course, they must be allowed to. *This is a craft village*" (*ở đây là làng nghề*). The inquiry ended there and Dung motioned for me to follow him back down the street and through the village archway to join his family for lunch.

Variations of this explanation came up often, during my attempts to understand the many little sightings of agrarian idiosyncrasies that seemed to nestle so easily, so nonchalantly, beside Mễ Trì's new roadways and modern glass buildings. Villagers and government officials responded to me using words such as "craft village" (*làng nghề*), "tradition" (*truyền thống*) and heritage (*di sản*) as if the notions explained themselves, without any reference to how or why such things

¹ Mễ Trì is pronounced like "may tree."

demanded our respect and acceptance. Chewing over my confusions through lunch with Dung and his family that day, I began to enter into an unexpected journey of following the history and development of a craft village, a path that would later shape my dissertation's ultimate findings about Hanoi's urbanization. But to get to that point, I first needed to reflect more critically on my initial question: In a city where makeshift tea kiosks and roaming street vendors are constantly chased and penalized by police for obstructing urban civil order (see Kurfurst 2012; Kim 2015), why are drying stalks of rice, which clearly clash with Hanoi's new urban aesthetics, then indisputably and readily accepted as being in the correct place? And why did the simple fact that the adjacent community was a "craft village" evidently settle any confusion about why rice straws were allowed to obstruct pedestrian traffic on urban sidewalks?

Agrarian Exception(alism) in City Spaces

The query about the rice straws, while appearing to be a minor detail in the landscape of an ethnographic field site, points to a broader issue that is at the core of this dissertation. The image of agricultural objects taking over a cement pavement challenges a longstanding ideal spatial division, between the rural and the urban, which structures Vietnamese frameworks for seeing and managing land and people (Harms 2011). By permitting elements of the rural to take over an urban pavement for the sake of a "craft village," my local guide, as well as the many pedestrians who treaded carefully past the straws that day, suggested that there are some exceptions to the rules of the rural-urban duality. Moreover, they demonstrate that these agrarian exceptions may sometimes hold greater sociocultural value than glittering and opulent urban skyscrapers or shopping malls. Thus, what began for me as an inquiry into the politically-charged responses of dispossessed farmers living on Hanoi's urban fringe suddenly took a detour when I started to pay greater

ethnographic attention to these agrarian anomalies. Zooming in on exceptional instances that challenge, not only the rural-urban divide, but also their hierarchical relationship, this research's fieldwork and analysis of Mễ Trì village seeks to understand the role of enduring agrarian peoples and practices in the broader context of Vietnam's urbanizing society. In particular, through my discussion of Mễ Trì's experiences of land transformation and craft village development, I inquire into the cultural and spatial construction of belonging, as well as exception, for people who see themselves as members of what were previously agrarian communities, but who also now find themselves living amidst urban-oriented changes in Hanoi, as a rising capital city in Vietnam, as well as in the greater Southeast Asia region.

In a proliferating number of communities surrounding the dense urban centers of Vietnam's growing metropolises, formerly agricultural peoples can no longer plow their fields but must now witness the flattening of paddy land and the construction of modern glossy buildings, just outside of their ancient village archways. With diminishing access to cultivatable land, these communities have congregated onto ever-shrinking plots of dense alleyways and packed multi-story homes. In the process, they have become awkward "villages in the city" (*làng giữa phố*) (Labbé 2014), where the glamorous aspects of urban planning never arrived, despite the fact that such places are now officially within the administrative structure of the inner core (*nội thành*). Instead, new livelihood opportunities in renting boarding rooms to migrants, opening up karaoke bars, and running various kinds of storefronts and kiosks have turned these village spaces into eyesores for state planners. According to both state as well as popular urban discourse, such villages have become zones full of dangerous, uncivilized, and immoral peoples and practices. The general public imagines these villages as places where insolvent gamblers and drug-abusers are lurking in the crevices of dark alleys, waiting to rob anyone who is unfortitiously passing by. In

this dissertation, which focuses on Mễ Trì, a former rice growing village in western Hanoi, I enter the supposed danger zone in order to capture the actual lived experience of a village undergoing land conversion and social change. By doing so, my study recounts the challenges and opportunities that came as Hanoi's new urban aspirations expanded onto agricultural land.

Since the introduction of two major policy reforms in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Vietnam has increasingly prioritized urban-oriented land use and economies, resulting in the subsequent marginalization of rural people—the “*nông dân*”²— and agricultural landscapes living on the edges of the country's major metropolises, such as Hanoi and Hồ Chí Minh City (for Hanoi, see Karis 2013, Labbé 2014 and Bousquet 2016; for HCMC, see Harms 2011 and Harms 2016a). Vietnam's Đổi Mới economic reforms of 1986 opened up production and trade to global capital and the Land Law of 1993 created a property market for buying and selling land use rights, which led to the acceleration of agrarian land dispossession and conversion on the urban margins. While the village communities surrounding Hanoi were once critical agricultural production zones during the collectivist period, under the restructured economy, these regions have become new urban frontiers (Leaf 2008; Digregorio 2011). They are focal sites of lofty urban infrastructural development and hubs for mediating global FDI, where skyscrapers, opulent villas, and shopping malls contribute to a new social-spatial order favoring lifestyles, values, and behaviors that are the converse of villages in the Vietnamese countryside (DiGregorio 2011; Searle 2016). In these emergent city spaces, residues of past agricultural customs and livelihoods are not only out of place, but they may even threaten the integrity of the planners' novel

² As opposed to the more politically charged term *dân cày*, which means the peasants/tillers as a class category, the notion of *nông dân* more broadly refers to people who engage in agriculture and live in rural settings; however, in contemporary discourse, *nông dân* is also used to refer to those living in “rural-like” settings who may not engage in agriculture at all. In this dissertation, use the terms *nông dân* and agrarian peoples interchangeably, as both concepts refer to people who are ambiguously tied to agriculture and rural areas.

urban ideals. Amidst such post-reform changes, Hanoi's former *nông dân*, who have been increasingly disarmed, devalued, and neglected by city master plans, must search for new livelihoods, roles and positions in the contemporary urban context.

Though land recovery for new urban construction has certainly incited a number of protests and violent revolts from dispossessed farmers, not all villagers in Vietnam are as enraged or even disheartened as one might guess. Firstly, by transferring their agricultural land to new owners, former agrarian peoples received a larger sum of money than they would have ever earned through agriculture, and these funds significantly improved their immediate material livelihoods while also enabling future generations the possibility for social mobility in the urban setting. In Mễ Trì, many people also express relief for losing their agricultural fields so that they no longer need suffer the hardships (*chịu khó*) and misery (*khổ*) of having to crouch over rice paddies underneath the hot sun for 12 hours each day. Dung's neighbors, Ms. Hà and Mr. Hồng, a middle-aged couple who have both worked in the fields since they could walk, constantly groaned at the idea of returning to the toils and troubles of farming whenever I mentioned the word "agriculture" (*nông nghiệp*). Their complaints about farming were always some variation of the following:

Mr. Hồng: I miss agriculture, in that I've done it a lot that I do miss it, but I don't really like doing it. In general, I don't like it. It is tiring; agriculture is strenuous.

Ms. Hà it is the most miserable occupation in the world!

Mr. Hồng: People often say (about agriculture) that [if you do it] "you sell your face to land, sell your back to the sky," (*bán mặt cho đất bán lưng cho trời*).³ ...nowadays if I still did agriculture, I would definitely have arthritis now [...] when you farm, you have to diligently cultivate for three years-- from the moment you plant the seedlings until the moment that you can finally harvest the rice. [Even then] you don't get really many grains from it grain from it. There are times when the mice eat the crops, there are times when it gets eaten by worms, and there are times when there are droughts. It is so exhausting! Doing agriculture is the most exhausting profession in the world, and yet you still end up starving and miserable. The work

³ His point here is that farmers must invest and sacrifice their entire physical bodies, their health, into the production of agriculture

is itself *miserable*; you have to wade in mud all the time. If I still did agriculture, I would probably be aching very badly right now. It was lucky that I was able to leave it.

While villagers are frustrated with the amount of compensation that they received from transferring their paddy land to urban developers, the majority of people still feel fortunate that their children and grandchildren will no longer need to toil in the muddy fields like they did. And many even have optimism that Mễ Trì village will soon become as wealthy and “civilized” (*văn minh*) as the new urban spaces that surround them. “It will be even more beautiful, because my village will build after,” Dung’s childhood friend, Hùng had pointed out to me. Yet at the same time, the two men, Dung and Hùng, are rarely present in the adjacent urban sphere across from their village gate. They can typically be found evading the Hanoi sun on small plastic stools with neighborhood men under the shady metal covering of a tea stand across from Dung’s alleyway. In their everyday choices, Mễ Trì villagers are constantly reinforcing the social and spatial divisions between their villages and the new urban territories. Such acts of grassroots differentiation can be seen in their decisions to build tubular houses⁴ instead of modern condominiums, to dine at home on the bamboo mat rather than in air-conditioned restaurants, or to shop in the sleepy village market as opposed to the bright convenience stores across the street.

This dissertation is not only about the victimization or exclusion of farmers by the indifferent dispossessory forces of market capitalism, but it is also about peoples’ multiplicity of choices and responses to such changes, including the indignant as well as the hopeful. In taking seriously a fuller and diverse range of experiences and perspectives from villagers whose lives

⁴Tube houses “*nhà ống*” refers to a particular style of architecture that has become a primary style of housing in Vietnamese urban settings. While tube houses have existed were developed before the 19th Century as a means of supporting multi-generational families, a particular style of “neo-tube housing” (Kien 2008) has become popular since the economic reform period. This style of housing, which is now becoming common in Hanoian villages such as Mễ Trì, is typically narrow multi-story home with minimal yard space, limited natural lighting and ventilation due to sparse use of windows.

have been altered by urban development, I aim to provide a narrative that complicates the notion of a one-sided and top-down “land grab” of agricultural fields, but one that suggests instead, *a many-scaled and multi-actor and land use transformation*. In Mẽ Tri, most villagers did not take up arms against urban developers, nor did they picket outside of government offices demanding for their land to be returned; yet, at the same time, their intimate, everyday practices of slowly adapting to new material conditions had important consequences on the way in which urban development unfolded in the village. This research draws from local perspectives and experiences to examine a set of fundamental empirical inquiries regarding the larger global phenomena of urban change:

1. *How do people respond to radical shifts in their land and livelihood?*
2. *What are their motivations and reasons for engaging in such practices?*
3. *And what are the implications of these responsive activities for the affected local actors and for the larger structures of urban change?*

Through a focus on craft development in Mẽ Tri, this dissertation will reveal some of the tools that villagers wielded to capitalize on the same forces that had taken their agricultural land and livelihoods. It regards such tools as forms of resilience, as the kinds of actions that people take to adapt to and thus overcome certain conditions of material transformation that cause them immediate hardship and precarity. **The primary argument that I will make in the upcoming chapters is that Mẽ Tri’s practices of adaptation through craft production demonstrate a politics of resilience, which has both material and symbolic implications. Craft production not only provides people with a transitional livelihood in their post-agrarian landscape, but it has also served as an important cultural tool and resource that villagers use in finding and cultivating meaningful identities amidst society’s contemporary urban-oriented shifts.** While the story of craft development in Mẽ Tri may appear to be unique, the narratives that people provide in explaining the history of their village craft point to a deeper struggle that they share with all

rural people whose lives have been transformed by urban development.

To begin, Mễ Trì's rice straw were not mere remnants leftover from rice production. The rice straw were the byproduct of a new village livelihood in handicraft production that has enabled Mễ Trì's economy to flourish amidst the immense changes to their land and way of life. In other words, the village's handicraft has made them *resilient* to the changes that would have otherwise completely hindered them from maintaining previous economic and cultural practices. What is more, the sight of the green rice straw drying on the grounds outside the village has become a characteristic image of Mễ Trì's craft activities—it is a representation of the village's *heritage*. In Mễ Trì village, landless rice farmers no longer tend to rice paddy fields. Instead, many have converted forty square meters sections of their residential space into a small scale agricultural processing facilities for producing an artisanal rice product called *cóm* (young rice). This small village-based industry has garnered national demand for the product, drawing the attention of central policymakers who want to preserve the craft as a cultural heritage of Hanoi, and of the nation. But without land to cultivate the rice inputs, young rice production is largely driven by the outsourcing of grains, the use of inventive new machinery, and most notably, an earnest village-and-state effort to repackage the village craft as “heritage” (*di sản*).

Mễ Trì's landscape has also recently gained the attention of urban developers who have transformed the once extensive paddy fields into a new space for supporting the nation's diplomatic affairs as well as economic growth, where elegant government buildings emerge alongside lavish commercial spaces. Hanoi's urban master plans anticipate that these new modern infrastructures will replace Mễ Trì's agricultural past. However, the development of *cóm* as a village craft suggests that there are certain agrarian things that are not only unquestionably allowed to remain in urban spaces, but also enthusiastically celebrated as integral to the distinguished

character of the urban. In other words, they make Hanoi “Hanoi,” a city with a history and culture that is different from anywhere else in Vietnam, in Asia, and in the world. The case of Mễ Trì therefore suggests that rural-urban transformations in Hanoi may be better understood with regards to the city’s economy of symbols, in which agrarian objects and people—such as rice straws and craftspeople—repackaged as national heritage, emerge as integral forms of (symbolic) capital that diverse stakeholders use to leverage their social and economic position in the face of global market changes.

Hanoi: The Rising Dragon Global Metropolis

The reasons for which the products and places of agrarian village life have appeared on the radar of state policymakers in Hanoi are related to the city’s broader identity struggle as it plunges into ebbs and flows of the global market economy. Hanoi’s favorable reception of Mễ Trì’s craft remnants only make sense when zooming out into these larger circuits of power and capital. In the context of the country’s contemporary economic shifts, Hanoi city faces the challenge of re-developing its post-*Đổi Mới* image on the international stage as Southeast Asia’s leading metropolis, in both political and economic affairs. As the capital of Vietnam, Hanoi has kept its seat as the home of the principal institutions and symbols of state socialism, such as the headquarters of national ministries, assemblies, and government organizations, as well as the monumental Ba Đình Square, where Vietnam’s exalted communist leader has been laid to rest. In the six districts that make up the city’s inner core, much of Hanoi’s bureaucratic and economic activities still run out of *nhà ống* (tube) houses and colonial era buildings. With its slow-moving urban development, Hanoi in the early 2000s, ten years after the passing of the *Đổi Mới* reforms, continued to lag behind its southern counterpart, Hồ Chí Minh City (HCMC), in foreign trade and

investment. In the early 1990s, HCMC was collecting more foreign investment than the entire Northern region as a whole (Logan 2009, 89; Turley and Womack 1998, 96). Nevertheless, given Hanoi's political dominance, national leaders sitting in the capital were quick to use state policies to refashion the city's global image, in order to redirect commerce from the south to the north.

In December of the year 2000, The National Assembly's Standing Committee declared Hanoi's position as, not just the political and administrative nucleus of the country, but also the country's leading center for culture, science, education, and international economic exchange. In subsequent years, Hanoi actively campaigned to attract foreign companies, institutions, and services that would serve as "world status markers," that would provide evidence of its competitive status in the market economy (Logan 2005, 78). To broadcast and amplify its dominance as a political and economic capital, the city even offered to host the major international and regional events, such as the Southeast Asia Games in 2003, the 14th APEC Economic Leaders' Meeting in 2006, the 16th ASEAN Summit in 2010, and the 2019 North Korea–United States summit. But with its comparatively outdated infrastructure, small population size, and modest urban spatial area, Hanoi has been at a competitive disadvantage relative to HCMC and other rising Vietnamese metropolises (e.g., Da Nang) for such taking on such responsibilities. In the eyes of Vietnamese officials, it simply did not look the part. For Hanoi to prove itself as a center of international commerce, the city first needed to develop the appropriate material structures to both facilitate and expand capital investment.

On August 1, 2008, Hanoi's city boundaries expanded to incorporate the neighboring province of Hà Tây, the northern district of Mê Linh (previously part of Vĩnh Phúc province), and 4 communes from Hoà Bình province. As a result, the capital's spatial area grew by 3.6 times its previous size while simultaneously doubling its population, from 3,145,300 to 6,232,940

overnight. This event marked the fourth momentous re-districting of Hanoi since 1954, and its expansion into agricultural land in the western suburbs of Hanoi provided the much-needed spatial resources for the city to manifest its ambitious urban planning visions. In 2011, then Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng passed Decision No. 1259/QĐ-TTg, approving the “Master Plan for Constructing Hanoi Capital towards 2030, with a vision for 2050,” a strategy that was jointly produced by three planning and architectural firms from South Korea, the United States, and Vietnam (Labbé 2010). This comprehensive urban master plan is expected to accommodate nearly 9 million urban residents by 2030 and nearly 11 million by 2050. Under the slogan of “green, cultured, civilized and modern” (*xanh, văn hiến, văn minh, hiện đại*), these urban master plans focus on building mega-projects of “new urban areas” (*khu đô thị mới*) to house the growing population, which increasingly include modern consumer-oriented architecture, exclusive residential buildings, and “green” parks and walkways (Waibel 2006). While adding to infrastructural improvements in Hanoi, such visual representations of urban modernity and wealth also resemble the same utopian, “world class” structures that exist in other growing cities in Vietnam, as well as elsewhere in Asia (Roy 2011; Ghertner 2011). Thus, even with its advanced modern infrastructure, Hanoi continues to face the challenge of representing itself as a city that is differentially entitled and more deserving than its competitors to be the region’s premier entrepreneurial metropolis.

To reign above the others requires that the city have not only sufficient material resources and state-of-the-art infrastructures but also outstanding symbolic capital to leverage its position against the already established Asian mega-cities, such as Hồ Chí Minh City, Bangkok, and Singapore. Urban scholar Sharon Zukin (2008) has aptly stated that, in the age of the entrepreneurial metropolis, “A city that does not curate its image and manage its story is

out of date. It cannot compete with other cities for investors, tourists, and affluent consumers. It cannot pay its own way” (xii). In other words, a city’s legitimacy and attractiveness to economic capital depends on its ability to “*re-present*” itself discursively and symbolically, as a means of harnessing the market of consumption (Abu-Lughod and King 2006). A city’s vibrant and well-curated urban identity lures capital and aids in its flow (Zukin 1995). These symbolic urban representations typically draw from the most exceptional parts of local and national history and culture as a means of enriching the aesthetic experiences of the urban built environment, through monuments, museums, and revitalized architecture from earlier periods.

Given Hanoi’s established position as the administrative center of Vietnam’s state socialist government, the city faces even higher stakes in its representational strategies: it’s global image must also represent and legitimize the country’s achievements under the current regime and one-party system. In 2010, policymakers in Hanoi used the city’s 1,000th birthday as an opportunity to demonstrate Hanoi’s one thousand years of national revolutionary strength and diverse cultural and economic accomplishments. Symbolic evidence of the city’s long-standing triumphs would help to validate Hanoi’s status as Vietnam’s “heroic capital” (*thủ đô anh hùng*), drawing in the confidence of both tourists as well as foreign entrepreneurs in the city’s commercial potential. In 2000, to prepare for this event, policymakers passed Resolution No. 15-NQ/TW on the “Directions and Tasks of Developing the capital of Hanoi between the time periods 2001-2010,” which highlighted the city’s role as the “cultural and recreational center of the country, a role that prominently formed through many centuries in the process of developing Thang Long- Hanoi,”⁵ the ancient city. But in this context, what might village craft products from an unassuming and formerly agrarian village on a city’s outskirts,

⁵ <http://www.xaydung.gov.vn/vi/web/guest/thong-tin-tu-lieu/-/tin-chi-tiet/ck4I/86/14846/mot-so-de-xuat-ve-chinh-sach-va-giai-phap-thuc-day-phat-trien-vung-thu-do-ha-noi.html>

such as my field site of Mê Trì, contribute to the symbolic curation of Hanoi as an entrepreneurial city? To understand the details and logics behind Hanoi's strategies for *re-presenting* its urban identity through symbols of "heritage" requires, first, a brief reflection on the city's unique historical and cultural landscape.

Hanoi: a city of agrarian villages

Unlike other cities in Vietnam, Hanoi's historical distinction comes from its antiquity and central role in the founding of the country. Hanoi is part of the low-lying Red River Delta, which is considered as the "cradle of Vietnamese civilization," the home territory of Vietnam's earliest ancestors (Goscha 2016, 51). The city of Hanoi itself has also been a key site for hosting revolutionary historical events and leaders through Vietnam's various anti-imperial victories as well as nation-building projects since 1010 AD—the year that King Lý Thái Tổ, the first ruler of the Lý Dynasty, moved the imperial capital from Hoa Lư (Ninh Bình province) to Thăng Long citadel, or what is now modern-day Hanoi. By the 19th Century, the Nguyen Dynasty had relocated the capital to Hue City in central Vietnam until French colonialists made Hanoi the capital of French Indochina. Then, in 1954, after the Viet Minh's victorious conquest over French forces, Hanoi resumed its role as the capital of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (or independent North Vietnam), and later, the national capital of a reunited Vietnam after 1975. Hanoi's central presence in Vietnam's narrative of anti-imperial independence, communist revolution, and socialist nation-building supports the capital's claim as the seat of the country's political leadership. At the same time, its proximity to the Red River Delta—the purported source of Vietnamese culture—gives it access to a mosaic of places and customs that Hanoi can claim as part of a broadly defined "Hanoian" history and culture. Thus, by the logics of Vietnam's collective identity as a nation-

state, Hanoi's unique culture would represent the foundation of the larger national culture.

The agrarian villages of the Red River Delta, particularly those in the northwestern zones of the region, where Mễ Trì is located, have long played important roles in Hanoi's urban economy and culture. As providers of goods and labor for centrally located elites, their circulation of people and products from the surrounding countryside has significantly contributed to the production of what many Hanoians consider as Hanoi's distinctive culture. Even today, the spatial and sociocultural contours of Hanoi are permeable and indefinite; Hanoian culture and people seem to flow in from all around the Red River Delta. Often considered as a city of many villages (Papin 1997), Hanoi has experienced a long history of expanding city boundaries to incorporate surrounding village communities into its municipal administration. In the late half of the 19th Century, Hanoi was even transformed into a province that included the regions of Hoài Đức, Phú Thường Tín, Phú Ứng Hoà, and Phú Lý Nhân.

Through its various administrative transfigurations, the citadel and the core districts have remained intimately tied to the surrounding villages, communities and rural landscapes. A prime example of such linkages is the Ancient Quarter's 36 Streets (and guilds), whose artisan residents were originally craftsmen from the nearby countryside. These artisans not only maintained ties to their home villages as to sustain exchange and filial relations with the rural areas, but they also infused present-day Hanoi with their own local customs (e.g., religious shrines), craft products, as well as architectural styles, which they brought into the city center from the villages. The Ancient Quarter's 36 streets represent the miniature form of a larger city-wide phenomenon, given that villagers from all around the Red River Delta have long permeated everyday life in Hanoi with their mobile customs, crafts and agricultural products. Because of these long-term interconnections, even items with clear and established village origins outside of Hanoi— for

example, staple foods such *phở* (from Giao Cù in Nam Định province) and *cốm* (from Mễ Trì in Hoài Đức province), and handicrafts such as pottery (from Bát Tràng and Bắc Ninh province), and silk (from Tào Phú, Vĩnh Phúc province)— have become simultaneously, and indisputably, cultural establishments of this capital city. In today’s context, as the city’s territorial boundaries expand to incorporate more and more villages of the Red River Delta, it’s cultural repertoire also expands, with important and strategic benefits for Hanoi’s entrepreneurial aspirations. Vietnamese leaders and city planners hope to wield these agrarian-based village cultures as symbols of Hanoi’s rich as well as ancient heritage, which would serve as markers of the mega-city’s superiority over other cities in Vietnam, and— though, ambitiously— the rest of Asia.

Mễ Trì: Hanoi’s Peripheral Heritage Center

Mễ Trì, the focus of this study, is one of the Red River Delta villages that has deep-rooted interconnections with Hanoi. Sitting 12 kilometers from the city’s ancient quarter, the village has provided the proximate urban economy with supplies of agricultural goods and handicrafts, as well as labor reserve since long before the colonial era. According to oral histories, Mễ Trì had been part of an agricultural region outside of the Thăng Long citadel until the beginning of the Nguyễn Dynasty in the 19th Century. Under the Nguyễn Emperors, it was first brought into Sơn Tây province under the prefecture (*phủ*) of Quốc Oai, of the rural district of Từ Liêm and canton of Dịch Vọng., and then in 1831, when Minh Mạng created Hanoi province, Mễ Trì became part of Hanoi’s prefecture of Hoài Đức, which remained in the rural district (*huyện*)⁶ of Từ Liêm, and canton of Dịch Vọng. When the French made Hanoi the capital of Indochina in 1888, the territorial province of Hanoi became “Hà Đông” and Mễ Trì subsequently fell under Hà Đông provincial

⁶ During this era, provinces (*tỉnh*) were the highest unit, underneath which was the prefecture (*phủ*), the district (*huyện*), the canton (*tổng*), and the village (*làng-xã*)

administration until the August Revolution of 1945 pulled Mễ Trì back into Hanoi's fourth urban district (*quận*) up to 1961, when it was once again re-classified as part of Hanoi's *huyện* of Từ Liêm. These administrative classifications are important because they continue to inform Mễ Trì present day narratives of their village history as a place with longstanding ties to Hanoi city. Such administrative changes show that Mễ Trì has always been proximate to the core of Hanoi, and while they had a taste of being "urban" for a brief time, mostly for the Việt Minh's purpose of strengthening national resistance forces, the village ultimately remained on the peripheral interface of rural and urban classifications, an agricultural land with urban orientations.

Before the western expansion of Hanoi into the regions of Từ Liêm and Hà Tây in 2014, the village belonged to a spatial configuration that Vietnamese urban scholars of Hanoi define as "*ven đô*," meaning, bordering (*ven*) the city/capitol (*đô*) (Nguyen 2014). In more colloquial and administrative terms, local residents and government bureaucrats described the village as being a "*huyện ngoại thành*," meaning, a rural district outside of the urban core. These Vietnamese terms classify Mễ Trì as belonging to particular hybrid spatial order that is akin to Terry McGee's notion of "desakota," the dynamic and densely-populated regions that emerge in between large urban cores, where the residents engage in both agricultural (primarily small-holder wet rice cultivation) and non-agricultural activities. Urban scholars of Asia theorizing on such hybrid spaces have also defined places like Mễ Trì as "peri-urban," bringing together the terms "peripheral" and "urban" (Leaf 2011; Friedman and Wulff 1976). Michael Leaf (2011) notes that the distinctiveness of this Asian space is that "periurbanization indicates the coming together of and intermixing of the urban and the rural" (528). He emphasizes that diversity is the decisive feature of the peri-urban, characterized by the "multiple and potentially conflicting populations and widely ranging economic activities" that co-exist in such spaces (ibid). Harms' ethnographically-grounded

examination of Vietnam's peri-urban "*ven đô*" spaces outside of HCMC shows that people living at this rural-urban, inside-outside interface both transcend and reproduce these terms in their everyday practices; such ideal spatial categories are fluid and malleable in practice as much as they are persistent in structuring space and society (Harms 2011). Harms' point about the strategic maneuvering as well as reproduction of ideal-spatial categories typifies my observations of how Mễ Trì villagers conceive of their village, as a rural-urban place that exists within the folds of new city developments.

65-year-old Bác Tùng, the leader of the Cốm Craft Village Association in the village's upper hamlet of Mễ Trì Thượng, my self-appointed teacher on Mễ Trì's culture and history, is adamant about Mễ Trì still being a rural countryside (*nông thôn*); at the same time, he sees recent changes as a sign of its long-awaited and deserving recognition, as being part of the city's core. He often declared, with strong conviction his voice that, "Mễ Trì will, in the future, be the center of Hanoi." He would also repeat this phrase to try and convince my local colleague, Ngọc, to buy a home in Mễ Trì, instead of in the surrounding districts of the newly incorporated Hà Tây region of Hanoi. Whenever Ngọc dabbled on settling in nearby Thanh Oai, Bác Tùng would quickly persuade her not to, "land in nearby Thanh Oai district is "miserable" (*khổ*)! they don't even have a *trade*!" His consideration of Mễ Trì as the future center of Hanoi was not because of the village's highly valuable land, "golden" land, as many people often say, but because of its invaluable features: the antiquity of its history and the diligence of the people. Compared to others in the village, Bác Tùng's family hardly benefited from land compensation money, being one of the first village households to lose paddy fields in 1999 when the price of Mễ Trì land was still low. Nevertheless, even without farmland, he and his wife, his son and two daughters had non-agricultural trades to fall back on after land recovery, such as motorcycle repair, selling goods at

the market, and, of course, *cốm* production. What's more, he has felt his village, and his own role in the village, rise in prominence in significant ways. Sitting back in his wooden chair, gazing into the serene yard of the village communal house (*đình*) next door, Bác Tùng would reflect on his projection of Mễ Trì's coming years:

This land was founded 6 years ahead of Thăng Long (the capital), that is why people bring the National Assembly and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs here; Mễ Trì will become the city center in the future. In the future, this will be the city center, the city out there will just be the relics to visit like a museum, and the city center will be here.

While many of my informants have also described Mễ Trì as a “city center,” to compare it's surrounding new urban structures with the commercial areas of Hanoi's core districts, Bác Tùng's statement made a bolder point. At the same time, his robust declaration spoke to the overarching aspirations that most villagers felt towards their situation, now almost two decades after losing their rice growing land. It was a simultaneous acknowledgement of the irony as well as optimism of Mễ Trì's future: that this region of once poor peasants and an entirely agricultural terrain would become a primal urban space. What it means is that, despite the fact that many villagers living in this region could still better irrigate rice fields than use computers, and despite their preferences for diluted green tea over coffee, and their decisions to spend weekends at home in their dark living rooms rather than in the nearby shopping mall, Mễ Trì was still progressing towards it's fated role, as Hanoi's city center. Bác Tùng was the village's most vocal believer of the esteemed cultural and economic position of Mễ Trì in the urbanizing and modernizing city of Hanoi. His reasoning points to fact that Mễ Trì's urban structures would not only be newer than those closer to the current city center, but also, and more importantly, he notes that Mễ Trì's urban destiny is justified in that the village history reaches back to a time that pre-dated Thăng Long, the ancient citadel of Hanoi.

Bác Tùng's understanding of Mễ Trì as a rural village (*làng nông*) with a promising urban

future was not an isolated opinion, as many villagers expressed similar sentiments, albeit, in less bold terms. Peoples' visions of Mễ Trì's redeeming recognition in Hanoi's culture and history often alluded to the government's recent decisions to move new administrative buildings out to Mễ Trì. But increasingly, they also pointed to the city's official accreditation of this former rice growing village itself as one of Hanoi's esteemed craft villages— Vietnam's sole provider of "*cốm*." "Only Hanoi has *cốm*," Bác Tùng reminded me, from time to time, "even in the South, there is no *cốm*. It only exists in Hanoi." The fact that Mễ Trì is the only place in Hanoi where *cốm* exists is an even greater reason for the village name to rise in prestige. In Hanoi, *cốm* symbolizes the arrival of the autumn season, signaling the city's cooling temperatures and abating rainstorms. *Cốm* is a rare seasonal rice snack that is distinguished from conventional white rice by its green flake-like grains and its sweet, nutty aroma, reminiscent of freshly harvested rice paddies. Because of the delicacy and high value of these grains, *cốm* is not eaten in mouthfuls but chewed and savored carefully by the morsel. During September and October in the inner parts of the city, women peddle small supplies of this treat on rattan trays strapped to their bicycles, or on the pole and baskets that they carry over their shoulders while roaming through the streets to find customers. Urban residents often buy *cốm*, neatly wrapped in lotus leaves, to bring back to their offices for sharing with colleagues, to give as a gift to their bosses and supervisors, or to offer at temples and ancestral altars.

Recalling the arrival of autumn in Hanoi, my friends and colleagues living in the city's core districts often described to me, usually through poems or poetic descriptions, the soft scent of *cốm* blowing into Hanoi on a gentle autumn breeze from the countryside. This pervasive romanticism of *cốm* in Hanoi's traditional autumn setting is one of the reasons why urbanites and urban policymakers are so eager to keep it around, despite the fact that the sources for producing *cốm*

are diminishing due to Hanoi's encroaching urbanization. Interestingly enough, as well, few people in the city know that the countryside from which the autumn breeze of *cóm* emerges is actually a place that is now encircled by luxury 5-star hotels, shopping malls, skyscrapers, and new administrative buildings. As such, the terms peri-urban and “*ven đô*” are no longer accurate descriptors of Mễ Trì, given that the village neither engages in agricultural production nor even “border” the city anymore. Rather, it is a place that exists within the expanded metropolis whose nationally celebrated craft products and claims of antiquity permit it to be *rural* and *agrarian* in the urban setting for the sake of valorizing Hanoi's “traditions.”

However, the truth of the matter is that *cóm* did not originate in Mễ Trì. Villagers openly acknowledge that it was either “borrowed” or “stolen” from nearby Vòng village around a hundred years ago and brought back to Mễ Trì as a supplemental trade to rice production. Nowadays, Vòng village still retains its fame among older Hanoian residents as the *cóm* village of Hanoi but the village no longer produces *cóm*, having lost their paddy fields to urbanization years before the same processes arrived to Mễ Trì. Yet even though Mễ Trì villagers are not the true descendants of the craft's original inventors, they retain their claim to the title of Hanoi's “*cóm* craft village” because, unlike Vòng, they had managed to preserve *cóm* in the midst of urban land transformations. “Vòng is not a craft village,” Bác Tùng said when the issue came up in conversation, “It does not have a brand (*thương hiệu*).” *Cóm* producers in Mễ Trì unanimously repeated to me the same statement about Vòng's ineligibility to become, recognized, *branded*, as a craft village of Hanoi. As usual, Bác Tùng's declaration encapsulated widespread village sentiments in much bolder terms:

Think of it this way, Emily: “*Mễ*” means grains, in the Hán dialect.⁷ “*Trì*” means water. In

⁷ Here, Bác Tùng is referring to the portion of the Vietnamese language that has Chinese roots, which is often referred to as Sino-Vietnamese or *Hán Việt*.

the days of the King, he came here to Anh Sơn⁸ to eat rice and to drink the rice wine of Mễ Trì, and he found it to be so good that he changed the name of the village into Mễ Trì. So, the village became Mễ Trì. That is why Mễ Trì was bestowed to become a traditional craft village. Vòng is not a traditional craft village. [The government] has re-examined the history and the traditions of Mễ Trì, and they found the roots here, Vòng doesn't have these roots (laughs). The people of Mễ Trì are very diligent, honest, and hardworking (*cần cù, thật thà, chịu khó*), that is why they can make this craft... Vòng can make [*cốm*] but with Vòng, nowadays, they learn everything from Mễ Trì.

The “roots” that Bác Tùng alludes to do not refer to craft origins, but rather, to their history as a rice growing region and the assiduous determination of the people that enabled the community to be resilient under challenging conditions. In Mễ Trì, *cốm* producing villagers have developed innovative electrical machines based on traditional models used in the old days in Vòng village and they have also secured sources of grain supplies from nearby rice growing regions in the extended outskirts of Hanoi. As a result, they can now produce more than five times the amount of their original daily output without needing to toil miserably in the paddy fields each day. These actions demonstrate the village's *resiliency* to the forces of land use change and urban development which have caused momentous change to Mễ Trì's landscape and economy. Mễ Trì's resiliency is seen in their capacity to quickly and creatively recover from certain material and socioeconomic challenges that have placed other similar communities into less favorable conditions.

Even while they no longer work in the fields, villagers continue to explain the success of their village craft as resulting from the same character traits that describes their previous labor contributions to collective agriculture during the early socialist periods: industriousness (*chịu khó*) and rigor (*cần cù*); the unique ability of Mễ Trì people to persevere through strenuous work (*việc vất vả*). In essence, hard work and diligence, the skills and virtues that villagers retained from agricultural labor, has become Mễ Trì's primary claim to their status as a traditional craft village

⁸ Anh Sơn is the previous name of Mễ Trì village.

of Hanoi. Their hard work and strength of character set the foundations for Mễ Trì *cốm* producers' legitimate recognition by the city government bodies as a traditional craft village of Hanoi in 2013 and as a national heritage product in March of 2019. Since its official endorsement, the village was provided a unique village "brand" (*thương hiệu*), reifying the place-based and historical connection between Mễ Trì and the artisanal product, even though *cốm*'s true origins lie elsewhere. The brand provides a way for Hanoi policymakers to manage production processes, for the purpose of commercial expansion in Vietnam, with the potential for future exportation of *cốm* abroad. At the same time, branding also authorizes these producers to enter the market economy, specifically with the skills and knowledge that they draw from their former agricultural livelihoods. In other words, because their craft product has been branded as Hanoi's heritage, Mễ Trì villagers are given special permission to continue being agrarian in the urban setting. As symbols of Hanoi's ancient spiritual traditions and heritage, this fragrant green rice product is an agrarian-derived exception to the urban norm.

A Politics of Agrarian Resilience

As I noted earlier, Mễ Trì's experiences of agricultural land loss and urbanization are not unique. Vietnam's fast-growing economy and ambitious urban master plans have driven urban and industrial development projects that result in the proliferating cases of land recovery and land use change for tens of thousands of agrarian-based village communities throughout the country. Moreover, these situations are not only present in Vietnam, but also globally. Village communities around the world, radically impacted by their loss of land, face similar kinds of material and socioeconomic challenges as those encountered by Mễ Trì people over the past two decades. International media and scholarly reporting on cases of

agricultural land dispossession for urban and industrial development— a process that is widely known in popular discourse as “land grabbing”— have been largely focused the sensational and catastrophic implications of such processes for the affected communities. In communicating to its audience that “land grabs” cause proliferating conditions of social and political instability and economic precarity around the globe, such narratives often selectively recount sensational episodes of violence against poor agrarian peoples. However, by focusing only on incidents of conflict between impoverished farmers and nefarious capitalists (as well as corrupt governments officials), popular accounts of land use change give less attention to other possible kinds of responses that people may take when experiencing the loss of their land, specifically adaptation and renovation. Moreover, land conflict literature overlooks the important ways in which grassroots actors may contribute to the dispossession and transformation of their land.

In Mễ Trì, villagers have largely responded to the loss of the agricultural land by temporarily using vacant construction sites to grow vegetables or support small business projects, and by re-configuring their residential areas into cramped, mixed-used spaces of migrant housing and *cóm* production workshops (see Chapter Five). Rather than reverse the loss of their agricultural land to urban development, such actions advance urban processes by converting the land from its previous material state to accommodate new uses. Building on Li et al. (2011)’s notion of “intimate exclusions,” this dissertation argues that Mễ Trì villagers’ grassroots, local-level acts of land use conversion contribute to the social and material changes that take place in their village. In other words, they were complicit participants, rather than powerless victims, of land dispossession and urban development. Yet, Mễ Trì’s actions did not simply enable such processes to proceed; rather, they enabled villagers to negotiate

with the terms of land dispossession and change. Mễ Trì's unique adaptation practices not only provided villagers with new agrarian roles and livelihoods in Hanoi's urban market economy, but their actions also worked to slow down the process of land use conversion. As a result of the villagers' practices of adapting to shifting material contexts, for the most part, the loss and transformation of their land happened incrementally and quietly; urban development did not stir an abrupt and heated politics of resistance.

The actions of Mễ Trì villagers did not only support their livelihoods, but they were also part of a political tactic that gave the villagers the power to maneuver with Hanoi's larger urban strategies and visions. In this dissertation, I will suggest that Mễ Trì's adaptive participation in Hanoi's land use transformation constitutes a politics of resilience to the forces of capital-driven urban development (Chapter 5). Resilience, in both natural and social sciences, refers to the capacity of a system (referring to both ecologies and societies) to withstand radical impacts by being able to adjust itself to shifting contexts (Dousset and Nayral 2019; Holling 1973; Keck and Sakpaolrak 2013; Redman 2005). Social scientists using the concept of resilience for examining human societies attend to roles and sources of change in adaptive social systems (Redman 2005; Gunderson and Pritchard 2002; Gunderson and Holling 2002); they suggest that resilient societies are those that exhibit not only "adaptability" but also 'transformability' in the face of global change and the challenges of the future (Keck and Sakpaolrak 2013; Bouzarovski et al. 2011).

Whether intentionally or inadvertently, the actions of Mễ Trì villagers had political consequences in that their practices of adapting to the socio-material conditions of Hanoi's new urban master plan also gave them greater control over the way in which urban development processes could unfold. Mễ Trì's resilient practices helped them to carve out exceptional and

meaningful spaces of belonging as formerly agrarian peoples living within Hanoi's urban landscape of commercial shopping malls, skyscrapers, and luxury villas. Their politics of resilience has re-configured the city's urban master plans and policies to accommodate their *cóm* production, small vegetable gardens, and in situ boarding houses. Moreover, through their persistent *cóm* craft-making, these formerly agrarian villagers negotiated a distinctive role for themselves as producers of Hanoian heritage within an urban society and economy that is otherwise hostile towards the presence of rice straws on urban sidewalks.

This dissertation examines the role of *cóm* production in Mễ Trì's broader experiences of land use change through five chapters. Chapter One provides insight into the process and experiences of urbanization in Mễ Trì since the late 1990s and early 2000s and the corresponding rise of public narratives that describe the village's social and moral downfall. Hanoi's urban development plans, which are based on ideologies of "urban civility," have re-casted peri-urban villages into spaces full of uncivilized people who have fallen into drug addiction, gambling and prostitution. Chapter One reflects on the moralizing narratives that Mễ Trì people tell about themselves in order to counteract disparaging public discourses on the village. This chapter argues that villagers have advocated for the maintenance and revitalization of particular agrarian-derived village traditions as a means of off-setting the perils and harms of urbanization.

Chapter Two zooms in on the symbolic centerpiece of the village's claims about the morality of the Mễ Trì people: the production of *cóm*. This chapter provides an overview of the history and post-agrarian industrialization of *cóm* since the era in which growers began losing agricultural land to urban development. Mễ Trì's *cóm* producers have adapted to the loss of their agricultural land by drawing on outsourced grains and machines to produce their village craft, leading them to radically transform craft production processes. While they no longer have land to

grow rice, Mễ Trì's *cốm* producers have drawn on their agrarian histories, knowledge and experiences to craft themselves into entrepreneurs with an elevated social status in Hanoi's urban society.

Chapter Three explores the cultural and social motivations that drive Mễ Trì *cốm* producers to engage in the production of this craft as opposed to wage employment in the urban economy. In describing their labor, *cốm* producers say that they are both “farmers” (*nông dân*) and “freelancers” (*làm nghề tự do*). Producers emphasize the freedom (*tự do*) that they are able to attain through *cốm* production as an ability to retain control of their labor time and laboring bodies — a freedom that they have also identified as central to an agrarian identity. This chapter shows that *cốm* production provides an avenue for villagers to respond to the unique sociocultural pressures of living in a space that “half-village, half city” *nửa làng nửa phố*. Because of its enduring ties to the village space and the household unit of production, *cốm* production enables producers to engage in Hanoi's growing market economy on their own terms.

Nevertheless, as Chapter Four shows through an exploration of the craft's “heritagization” (Breidenbach and Nyíri 2007; Smith 2009; Bendix 2009; Salemink 2012; Salemink 2016), villagers' experiences of freedom in *cốm* production are becoming increasingly hampered by state regulations over the quality and branding of *cốm*. Chapter Four explores the discourses, symbols, and paperwork that underlie Mễ Trì's claims to *cốm* as a product of the village's collective heritage. Villagers draw on Mễ Trì's history reputation of rice farming to connect their *cốm* to an “agrarian social imaginary” (Mayes 2013), which ultimately serves to substantiate the purity and authenticity of their *cốm* against that of Vòng village—where the product originates. Given the village's recent state recognition as an official producer of a national heritage product, *cốm*

production has provided the landless and formerly agrarian peoples of Mễ Trì an elevated status and special privileges in Hanoi's urban economy and society.

Chapter Five concludes this dissertation by situating Mễ Trì's *cóm* production within the broader processes of land use change that have been re-shaping the village terrain since the late 1990s. In contrast to the dominant literature and media on “land grabbing,” which fixate on high-profile incidences of farmer-led resistance, Mễ Trì villager describe their experience of losing land as a slow, quiet, and piecemeal process, involving *cóm* production, as well as makeshift gardening and renting out boarding rooms. This chapter proposes that Mễ Trì's experiences can be best understood as an incremental process of *land use transformation*, involving the adaptive actions of villagers as well as the macro-processes of urbanization driven by state actors and capital. Rather than engaging in acts of protest or resistance to the loss of their land, villagers have participated in livelihood practices that have enabled them to also negotiate with the terms of dispossession and change. Mễ Trì's acts of self-transformation and adjustment to new socioeconomic circumstances—through *cóm* and other adaptations— encapsulate what I define in this dissertation as a *politics of resilience*.

Mễ Trì: Conflicts and Arrivals

It currently takes about half an hour to arrive at Mễ Trì village on motorbike from Hoàn Kiếm Lake in the central tourist area of Hanoi. This village community resides in an area in the western part of the city, in Nam Từ Liêm district, and is now encircled by luxury urban areas, skyscrapers, 5-star hotels, and government buildings [**Image 3**]. Mễ Trì consists of two village hamlet communities, Mễ Trì Thượng and Mễ Trì Hạ, which are partially separated in certain social activities, but otherwise intertwined administratively, culturally

and territorially. The two hamlets are managed together as Mễ Trì urban ward (*phường*) under the ward's People's Committee, which is made up of cadre members from both hamlet communities. Some village elders told me that the two communities, Thượng and Hạ, were once united in the old days (perhaps a century ago), but the village eventually divided into two to accommodate a growing population. In other accounts of the village history, some people suggested that internal conflicts between families and neighbors resulted in the division of the two communities. Currently, Mễ Trì has a population of 24,322 residents and has grown substantially over the past decade from its 1998 population size of 13,910, mostly due to the influx of migrants coming to the village to rent rooms since land recovery. Between 2000 and 2006, the village had lost 194 hectares of land to urbanization. Today, only a few specks of the village's agricultural land still remain cultivated, between new roadways and urban building. In such places, investors have secured the plots for their upcoming projects, but developers have not yet razed the ground to start construction. However, given their dismantled irrigation systems and scanty pieces of land, the few villagers who still cultivate mostly grow vegetables for eating at home. As the village's agricultural land diminished, it's remaining residential space has become increasingly packed with new rental homes as many villagers have found new livelihood opportunities providing rooms, goods and services to the incoming migrant population.

Today, villagers engage in a wide array of non-agricultural economic activities in addition to renting boarding rooms. Many operate small stalls and kiosks in the village for selling food, beverages and household goods, some run motorbike repair shops, clothing shops or hair salons, and some manage miscellaneous small-scale private businesses. Some members of the younger generations below 30 years old, those who were still school age

during land recovery, are now employed in various white collar wage-earning jobs in various business and government offices in the village and throughout the city. 10.5% of the labor force also engage in other temporary activities such as motorbike taxi driving (*xe ôm*), peddling foodstuffs, construction work, part-time electricity repair, and paper-making (Nguyen 2011, 121). Meanwhile, approximately 120 people, or 80 households, produce *cốm* as their main economic livelihood. While the number of actual craft producers in the village is small, *cốm* is still pervasive and ever-present during the two production seasons (the main season being August through November and the late season from March through early May); most villagers handle the product in some capacity during these six months. After separating the grains from the stalks, older women dry the remaining rice on the streets to later use them for making brooms. Neighbors of *cốm* producers buy and re-sell the product in various amounts to colleagues in their offices. Meanwhile, the sons and daughters of producers run family Facebook pages for reaching customers in more distant places of Hanoi, as well as in other provinces of Vietnam. During *cốm* season, the air in the village is perfumed with the fragrance of freshly roasted *cốm* and the streets are littered with rice stalks and dust from the production processes. For these months, *cốm* is literally impossible to avoid.

I began fieldwork in Mễ Trì during the main production season in August of 2017, tripping and stumbling over baskets of *cốm*, and drying rice stalk as I made my way through the village for introductory interviews. As a Vietnamese-American whose parents were born in the Southern and Central regions of Vietnam, rather than in Hanoi, I had never even heard of *cốm* and was thus not aware of its significance. I associated *cốm* with the popular green coconut milk ice cream sold at the Trảng Tiền Plaza in Central Hanoi, which, for several years, I had thought was just normal rice dyed green. The reasons why I had chosen to study Mễ Trì

initially had nothing to do with *cóm* at all. Rather, I had arrived at Mễ Trì because I was looking for a safe way to study land conflicts. Like many other researchers and reporters of Hanoi's urbanization, I was drawn to the formerly rural communities of Hanoi after reading stories in the media about the Vietnamese farmers retaliating against local authorities and developers who tried to take their paddy land. In Thái Bình province, a fish farmer had thrown Molotov cocktails at policemen on the day that bulldozers had come to raze his farmland. And not too far from Hanoi's current center, in Văn Giang district, villagers spent over a year protesting the loss of their paddy fields to the new Eco Park luxury township, a satellite urban area of Hanoi. "Don't get yourself into trouble with authorities," was the advice I had frequently received from my colleagues and mentors at the Anthropology department of Hanoi National University. Prior to starting fieldwork, I heard numerous rumors from my peers about airport customs officers confiscating research data from foreign students studying Vietnam's land conflicts. Some people even confided to me that they felt constantly surveilled and followed after leaving their field sites. Anxiety about personal and professional safety led me to Mễ Trì because it was a place where the transfer of land from villagers to developers, and the transformation of spaces from paddy fields to skyscrapers had occurred nearly decades before. The conflict was, as I assumed, settled, such that I could safely discuss the experiences of land use change with the villagers. In Mễ Trì, I learned that while land grabbing is an issue that the villagers faced, it was not the only issue that mattered when it came to their experiences of land use change.

During the first few days that I arrived at Mễ Trì, in the company of my colleague Tuan and Mễ Trì's Youth Union Secretary, Dung—who had been assigned to "guide" (*hướng dẫn*) me during my research—I hardly ever spoke to villagers about urbanization or land recovery.

Instead, I found myself learning about their experiences of losing agricultural land indirectly, through the topic of *cóm*. While the sudden appearance of two outside researchers and a cadre to discuss land use change would elicit reticence or suspicion from village interviewees, the topic of Mễ Trì's burgeoning craft industry was always warmly welcomed. Mễ Trì villagers, young and old, universally love talking about *cóm*. Eventually, I decided to briefly put away my curiosity about land use change to learn more about the village craft, which enabled me to gain the trust of many new village informants. In the beginning I felt constantly anxious about abandoning my proposed research topic, since *cóm* was not what I had intended to study for eighteen months. However, as I became more deeply involved in the lives of the village *cóm* producers, I realized that *cóm* is not only relevant to my original inquiries about the politics and practices of agrarian land transformations, it is central to Mễ Trì's unique experience of such social-spatial changes.

My genuine curiosity to better understand the village's craft product as well as other local traditions gave me unique access to talk with a diverse array of villagers, none of whom questioned my presence as a foreign researcher in the village. After all, they argued, a study of Mễ Trì's *cóm* might bring greater attention to the village's branded products and thus, greater sales. My local guide, Dung and his family, including parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins, were initially my main contacts and resources in Mễ Trì. Because Dung was a cadre and I was often seen with him and his family around the village, other people eventually opened up their homes to me, knowing that my acceptance by local officials meant that I had some authorization to linger around and ask nosy questions. After spending more time in Dung's home and community, I was introduced to his neighbors, Mr. Hồng and Mrs. Hà, two *cóm* producers, and their daughter, Hoa, who was not only my exact age, but also a

fluent speaker of English. Hoa and I quickly became friends and often met during lunch hours in the city center, where she worked at a Spanish travel agency, and we also help sort and package *cóm* in the evenings and weekends at her parents' home. In the next season of *cóm*, I volunteered to help the family with menial daily tasks related to *cóm* production while also running an English-language Facebook page to sell their *cóm*, with the help of Dung's mother, to expatriates living in the central districts. In due course, my research and life in Hanoi became defined by this green rice product.

This research took several unexpected turns from its original methodologies; nevertheless, I found that such ethnographically directed twists and turns provided narratives that are integral for addressing the original inquiries. Thus, while I did not find much *conflict* in the form of protest or violent retaliation in Mễ Trì, the stories and objects that I found instead also played a powerful role—perhaps even more powerful than open conflict and protests—in determining the shape and limits of urban development and agrarian destruction.

Images



Image 1: Rice straw drying in the July sun on the edge of Mễ Trì



Image 2: Rice straw drying in the July sun on the edge of Mễ Trì

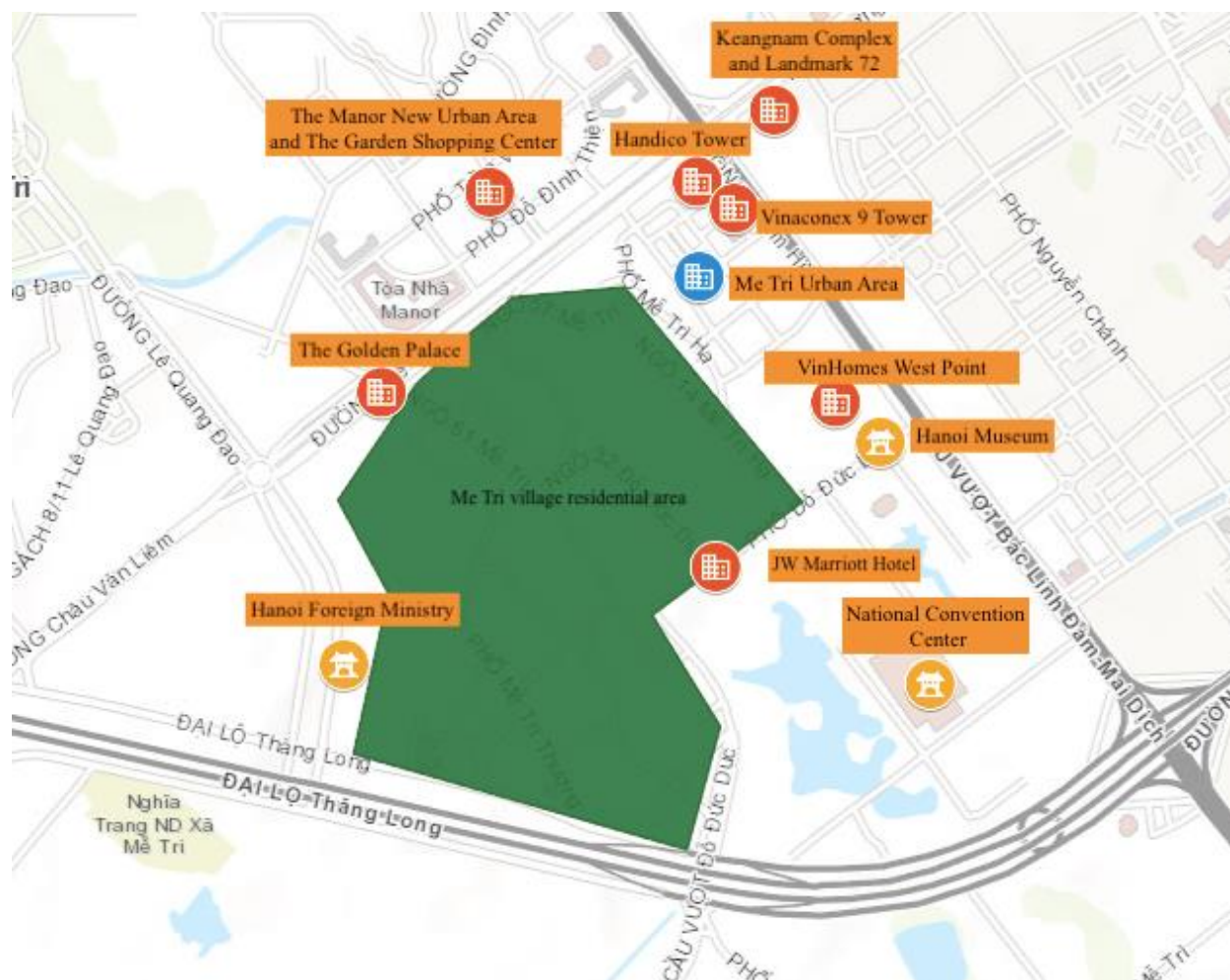


Image 3: Map of Mễ Trì Village and surrounding development.



Image 4: fresh cốm.

Chapter One- “Half Village- Half City:” Locating Morality, Civility and Elegance in Mễ Trì Village

1.1 Introduction:

Long before I stepped foot into Mễ Trì village, I had heard warnings about what to expect once I got there. One Hanoian colleague who had resided in Mễ Trì Thượng until her early teens recalled that her father forbade her from driving alone back into the village in the evenings after school. Instead, she would wait on the main street outside of the village entrance to be picked up by a family member and driven safely through the dim and ominous alleyways back to her home, where the family would then secure their metal gates with a lock from the inside. Other colleagues at my host university continued to relate this image of Mễ Trì to me, of a once-rural village that, having “urbanized too quickly” (*đô thị hoá quá nhanh*), had become a place swarming of depraved people and dangerous illegal activities, such as prostitution, drug-use, gambling, and even murder. Many people advised against living in the village, suggesting that my foreign naiveté and petite stature would make me a vulnerable target for a mostly unspecified and broadly-defined “harm.” Because of these constant warnings, in my early imaginations of Mễ Trì I saw only dark mazes of shadowy and menacing alleys full of delinquents and thieves. Frightened by such images, I was eventually deterred from finding permanent lodging inside of the village, instead opting for weekly accommodations at the 2-star hotel next to the village gateway, where Korean businessmen often stayed when attending meetings at the nearby Keangnam Tower. As time passed, however, I found greater comfort behind the secured gates of village homes than in the empty main streets surrounding Mễ Trì. In the village, even in the evening darkness, observant eyes were always patrolling the alleyways from behind the locked gates. There was also always plenty of tea and fruit to enjoy in peoples’ living room hearths after the evening curfew.

The image of dangerous and dilapidated urban settlements is a typical representation of many villages in the western region of Hanoi, not just Mễ Trì alone. According to such depictions of Hanoi's peri-urban villages, the formerly rural communities that sit on the edges of the city have become places full of uneducated and unemployed peasants who now live immorally because they have squandered away their land compensation money into gambling and wasteful material consumption. Such gloomy portrayals of peri-urban villages are part of a broader discourse about the development of “urban civility” (*văn minh đô thị*) in modern Vietnamese society that largely advocates for the elimination of rural spaces and societies (Harms 2016a; Harms 2016b). Ideas about urban civility draw on timeworn categorial oppositions between the rural and the urban to rhetorically impose order on Vietnamese societies and spaces through particular kinds of spatial aesthetics and social standards. The language and image of urban civility suggest appropriate ways of living and behaving in a modern society, which celebrate urban life for representing morality and progress while denigrating peasant society—the *xã hội nông dân*—for being immoral and backwards. Under official master plans and policies that strive to build urban civility in Hanoi, villages like Mễ Trì stand in stark contrast to the new urban residential areas and have thus become places that receive considerable public criticism and disparagement.

Against public accounts of Mễ Trì as a place of danger and uncivility, this chapter aims to provide village perspectives of Mễ Trì's recent urban transformations. It argues that villagers advocate for the maintenance and revitalization of particular agrarian-derived village traditions as a means of off-setting the perils and harms of urbanization. In Mễ Trì, villagers acknowledge that radical changes have occurred in their village since the loss of agricultural land; nevertheless, they suggest that the “social evils” (*tệ nạn xã hội*) of urbanization were primarily caused by outsiders (migrants from countryside) and exogenous influences (market behaviors). In describing the

village's recent urban changes, Mễ Trì villagers tell a moralizing account about capitalism and its dangers, through which they promote hard work and a willingness to endure difficulty (*chịu khó*) as the virtuous means of attaining entrepreneurial success in the market economy.

Building off of Jellema's (2005) and Horat's (2017) insights about the complex interrelations between economic and moral transformations in post-Doi Moi Vietnam,⁹ this chapter provides an ethnographic insight into the relationship between the state's strategies for building urban civility and the shifting moral universe of everyday Vietnamese citizens. Living in a place that is "half-village and half-city," Mễ Trì villagers face present moral dilemmas by striving to balance past agrarian traditions with new understandings of urban modernity and civilization. They contend that, with the right discipline and family support, Mễ Trì people are able to take the moral pathway towards capitalist prosperity because of their strong ethic of hard work, which is inherent to the traditions of a formerly agricultural community. Using morality as a window into the understanding of a village's changing values and social relations, this chapter will thereby examine the broader sociocultural consequences of urban development on Mễ Trì as a formerly agricultural community in Hanoi.

1.2 Urbanization in Mễ Trì:

By the end of 2018, Mễ Trì continued to witness proliferating urban development in places where land had already been transferred to new users in previous years. Villagers were accustomed to the sight of cranes, bulldozers and construction hats popping in and out of the aluminum walls that demarcate the boundaries of new urban projects on former paddy fields. However, there was

⁹ Hefner (1998) observes a widespread pre-occupation with morality as capitalism expands throughout Asia.

a time when the scale and frequency of these urban transformations were not yet commonplace details of everyday village life, but rather, constitutive of a radical and life-altering event. The most pivotal land use changes in Mễ Trì occurred between 1997 and 2006 when agricultural fields first came under novel forms of administration, property relations, and land use practices that were tied to the new Hanoi Urban Master Plan (1990-2010) and Land Law of 2003. These changes took place throughout all of Hanoi's Từ Liêm Rural District, where Mễ Trì village had belonged administratively until 2014. Such urban expansion strategies re-defined Hanoi's western peri-urban landscapes as zones of non-agricultural infrastructures and industries and recovered more than 35% of Từ Liêm's spatial area for the development of non-agricultural projects (Nguyễn 2007). Simultaneously, the revised Land Law of 2003 enabled the state to recover land use rights from farmers for vague and thus flexible "socio-economic development" purposes, which gave local state officials ample maneuvering room to authorize a wide range of urban construction projects. The flexibility of this eminent domain clause in the 2003 Land Law partially explains why the constructions eventually diverged from the original plans of building spaces to serve local public interests, such as schools and vocational training institutes. This early decade of agricultural land recovery introduced a number of key projects that transformed Mễ Trì's agricultural landscape into a place of prime commercial real estate development as well as global consular affairs.

Hanoi's westward expansion of new infrastructure into Từ Liêm Rural District gained momentum after the incorporation of nearby Thanh Xuân and Cầu Giấy districts into the urban core (*nội thành*) administration in 1995 and 1997, respectively. Around that time, construction of the Láng Hoà Lạc Highway also began, connecting Hanoi's central districts to the new Hoà Lạc Hi-Tech Industrial Park further West of Mễ Trì and to Nội Bài Airport in the North. In 2000, Trung

Hoà-Nhân Chính, Hanoi's first fully commercial residential area, also overtook the paddy fields located directly north of Mễ Trì (Labbé and Boudreau 2011; Labbé 2014; Labbé and Boudreau 2015), and its success highlighted the rising commercial potential of Từ Liêm District. Between 2000 and 2005, Từ Liêm rural district had approved 257 projects amounting to 1,399 ha of land, much of which had been previously used for cultivating rice (Nguyễn 2007, 21). As the chosen site for hosting Vietnam's first SEA Games Tournament in 2003, Từ Liêm began to experience extensive agricultural land recovery in the early 2000s for the development of the Mỹ Đình Sports Complex, and its accompanying roads, hotels, and recreational sites. These infrastructural improvements in Từ Liêm then paved the way for larger municipal plans to transform the region into a center of politics, culture and sports in accordance with the national slogan for modernization and industrialization: "wealthy people, strong country, egalitarian society, democracy, and civilization" (*dân giàu, nước mạnh, xã hội công bằng, dân chủ, văn minh*).

Given its strategic location at the node of two important transportation axes, north-south towards Nội Bài airport, and east-west towards Láng Hoà Lạc Hi-Tech Zones, Mễ Trì's land area was also becoming increasingly recognized as an advantageous site for administrative and diplomatic institutions. Between 2000 and 2005, 38 projects earmarked over 215 hectares of Mễ Trì's agricultural land¹⁰, whereby the two most prominent were Mễ Trì Hạ Urban Zone (2002) and the National Convention Center (2004), comprising a total of 77.6 hectares of land surrounding the village dwellings. In six years, the percentage of non-agricultural land grew from 33.18% in 2000 to 63.54% in 2006, with the majority of the land used for building new housing and offices (Nguyễn 2007, 42-44). Nguyễn Thi Hạ Thành, a Human Geographer from Hanoi National

¹⁰At this point, it was administratively known as Mễ Trì Ward, which included Mễ Trì Hạ and Mễ Trì Thượng (two interconnected villages), and Phú Đô.

University, who conducted her Master's research in Mễ Trì on these early years of land use change provides a number of statistics that illustrate the extent to which such projects altered the village's agricultural landscape. The charts below [Figures 1 and 2], which I borrow from her Master's Thesis, show a complete reversal in land use designations in Mễ Trì between 2000 and 2006. The figures clearly depict declining agricultural land use and corresponding growth in non-agricultural land use, whereby a total of 217.5 ha of agricultural land had been converted in the six-year span (Nguyễn 2007, 40-41).

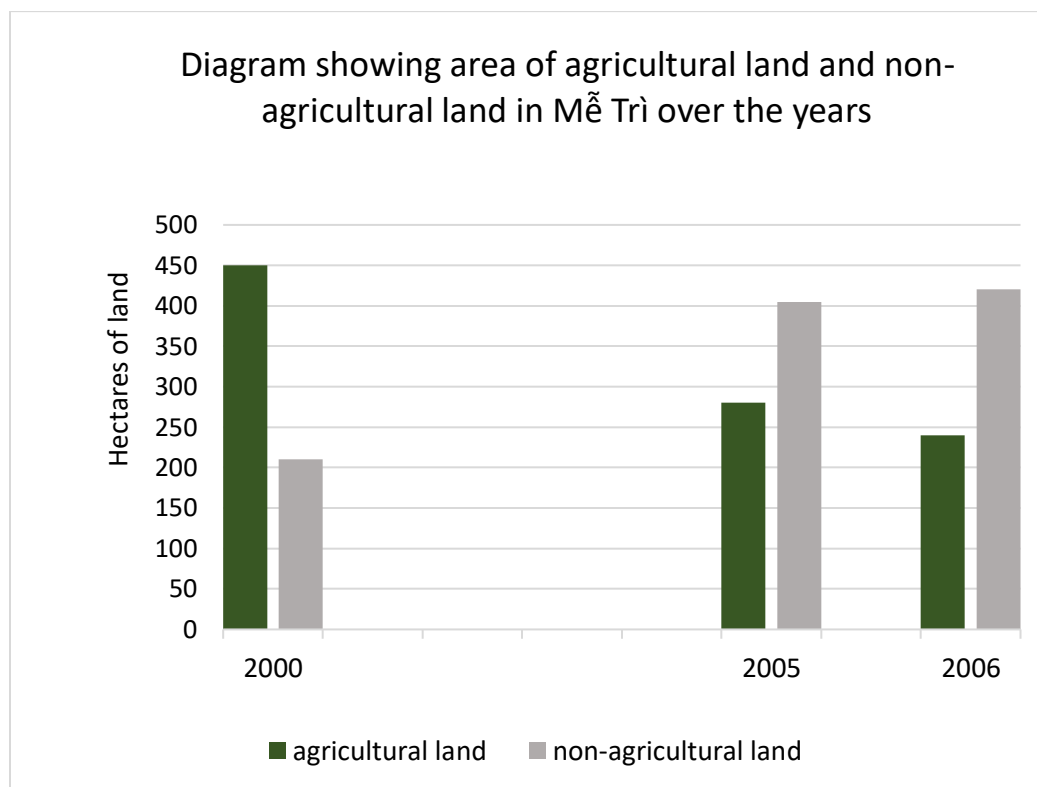


Figure 1: Diagram of land use in Mễ Trì between 2000 and 2006. Figures based on data presented in Nguyễn 2007, 40-41

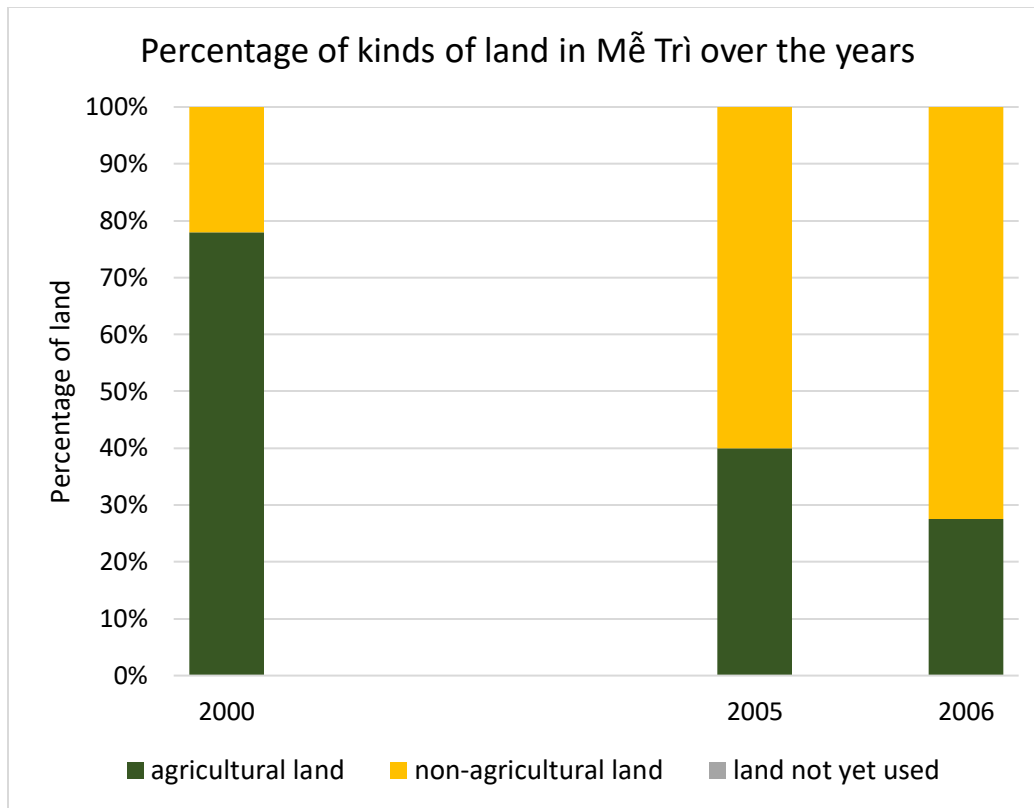


Figure 2: Percentage of land use types in Mễ Trì between 2000 and 2006, based on data presented in Nguyễn 2007, 40-41

Defining urbanization as the percentage of land that becomes incorporated into an urban project each year, Nguyễn suggests that the average rate of urbanization in Mễ Trì was about 5.65% per year between 2000 and 2005, with the most significant change occurring in 2004 (at 11.17%), likely due to the 64 hectares of land recovery allocated for the National Convention Center (ibid, 47). In addition to changes in land use practices during the early years of land recovery, there was also a substantial growth in the region's population given that villagers, having lost their rice growing land, were beginning to renovate their homes into cheap boarding rooms for migrant workers and students. According to Từ Liêm's census documents, Mễ Trì's total population between 1997-1998 was at 13,859 people and by 2006-2007, it had reached 22,692 people (Từ Liêm Office of Statistics 2007).

Such rapid demographic and material changes in Mễ Trì had significant social and cultural

implications on long-term villagers, particularly due to the necessity for villagers to transition into new labor and livelihood practices. Following the loss of their paddy fields, villagers found economic opportunities in providing goods and services to newcomer residents and businesses. Many homes along the main village alleys have turned their ground floors into motor bike repair shops, noodle and rice stands for lunch, hairdressing parlors, and mini-storefronts selling household goods and produce. In the village markets and on the shaded corners of alleyways, village women sit on the ground with their rattan baskets throughout the day selling freshly picked vegetables, meat, and eggs to residents passing through on motorbike on their way home. These days, long-term villagers keep household and neighborhood social affairs to the first two floors of their homes, around the family altar and over protracted cups of tea in the living room. Meanwhile, the proliferating population of young tenants zip in and out of the buildings and alleyways surrounding the downstairs family hearths¹¹ at a different and hastier tempo. The long-term-newcomer ratio in Mễ Trì feels most apparent during the Lunar New Year, when migrant renters and students return to their hometowns (*quê*), leaving the village spaces eerily quiet and deserted. These internal metamorphoses, which have occurred within the village gateways and behind the proverbial bamboo hedge, emerged in tandem with the middle-class commercialism and grand government projects that have sprouted on the village exterior—it's former paddy fields. While these new urban developments have put Mễ Trì on the map as a prime location for real estate development and international affairs, the projects also carry with them a particular ideology about “urban civility” that disparages the region's pre-existing and formerly agrarian residents.

¹¹ Domestic life in typical village homes in Hanoi is concentrated on the ground floor where the familial altar is also located. Social life and spiritual life occur simultaneously in the same space on the ground floor of a village home and provides a feeling of *coziness* that is best represented here by the image of a hearth.

1.3 *Elegant and Civilized Hanoi*

The ubiquitous concept of “urban civility,” (*văn minh đô thị*), which appears in both state policies as well as everyday public discourse, is a logic of modernization and urbanization that ties strategies of urban social-spatial order with the notion of “*văn minh*” to inform top-down policies on land use/conversion as well as particular codes for urban social conduct (Harms 2009). *Văn minh* is both a “top-down dogma useful to a one-party state seeking to control a potentially unruly population” as well as a rhetorical device that everyday Vietnamese citizens can use to articulate their aesthetic values and preferences or to impose particular standards of behavior on others (Harms 2014, 226). Moreover, the idea of urban civility depends on the reproduction of rural-urban categories of difference in a spectrum on civilization and progress, which places peasants living in the countryside on the least civilized end and elite urban intellectual at the highest end of civility. *Văn minh* suggests appropriate ways of behaving in modern society using particular images of morality that celebrate urban life and urban built environments for representing order/progress—and thus righteousness of form and conduct—while denigrating rural migrants and the *nông dân* for bringing disorder and underdevelopment into the city. Such dichotomous associations between civility/uncivility and urban/rural have existed since at least the colonial era and representing a recurring theme in literature and artwork of that time period (see for example, Rato 2004). As an ideology that also informs socialist policymaking, *văn minh đô thị* in the present day legitimizes land dispossession and conversion in the peri-urban zones for the moral, social and economic development of society, suggesting that de-agrarianization (Bryceson 2005) and planned urban development will modernize and moralize the remaining peasants that currently contaminate the city.

In Mỹ Trì, *văn minh đô thị* is the aspiration and justification behind the blueprints of the state’s master plans to transform the region into Hanoi’s rising destination for global and

administrative affairs and for elite cosmopolitan standards of living. But the term also appears in neighborhood flyers that remind villagers to keep sidewalks and public spaces beautiful and clean, to prevent landless and rural-minded urban denizens from tarnishing urban planning visions with their backwards and unmannered behaviors. Yet, the goal of developing *văn minh* in the urban setting is not limited to the new urban spaces that surround Mễ Trì, nor is it unique to Hanoi's city transformations. In Li Zhang's ethnography on China's emerging gated communities of middle-class homeowners, she shows that the notion of "*wenming*" informs a set of agreed-upon principles governing individual conduct for those who wish to live in the residential community (Zhang 2010, 19). By enforcing certain kinds of "civilized" behaviors from residents, these social contracts enable the homeowners to enjoy a private paradise within the confines of the gated urban township. In India, similar notions of urban civility cast in terms of "world-class" city building have shaped certain development and renewal practices of rural and slum settlements in the urban periphery to reflect a new urban aesthetic of the world class "Global Indian" (Roy 2011, 266; Ghertner 2011).

Returning to Vietnam, Harms' ethnographic study of Thủ Thiêm and Phú Mỹ Hưng, two recent master plan urban development projects in Hồ Chí Minh City (HCMC), illustrates *văn minh đô thị* expanding the city boundaries through luxury townships that allow urban Vietnamese to enjoy modern living standards but in spaces that are markedly less cramped, crowded and polluted than in the city center (Harms 2016a). The narratives on urban civility that Harms collected from residents of HCMC's new urban townships support Lefebvre's arguments about the "social production of space" which proposes that revolutionary social transformations demand a corresponding creative reorganization of daily life, language and space (Harms 2016a, 81; Lefebvre 1991, 54). Harms suggests that his informants would agree with Lefebvre given that their descriptions of the new urban townships were about much more than the materiality of such spaces,

but that “the new spatial relations produced by the development are intimately entwined with new forms of social consciousness, new modes of interpersonal interaction, and new kinds of subjectivity. It is a civilized space because people within it act civilized, and people act civilized because it is a civilized space” (Harms *ibid*, 81).

Yet, despite the various social and material advancements in the city’s urbanizing spaces, state planners still worry that civility has not yet arrived in its fullest form. Thus, “urban civility” remains critically important to the state’s agenda on implementing the physical and social infrastructure to establish Hanoi’s role as the country’s cultural, political, as well as rising economic capital. At the XVI Congress of Hanoi City Party Committee in November of 2015 to plan for the period of 2015-2020, Tô Văn Động, Director of Hanoi’s Ministry of Culture and Sports gave a speech entitled “Developing cultural works and constructing elegant and civilized people to meet the requirements of sustainable development in the capital,” pointing to Hanoi’s ongoing need for greater civility in society. In the speech, Tô praised Hanoi’s achievements in preserving and promoting its rich cultural heritage in support of the city’s socioeconomic development, but he also raised concerns about the status of efforts to build “elegant and civilized people” (*người thanh lịch văn minh*). A summary of Tô’s speech on Hanoi’s official City Government webpage purports that:

Building elegant and civilized people is not yet adequate with the needs of a 1,000 year-old capital city full of culture, it has not yet formed a system of human dispositions with clear moral standards, [and] ways of life for Hanoi, it has not yet made a clear evolution in the cultural behaviors of the people. (Nhóm PV 2015).

The solution that Tô proposes, on behalf of the Ministry of Culture and Sport, is a mixture of institutionalized cultural retraining for citizens as well as increased centralization of cultural affairs in Hanoi to better support the country’s socialist-oriented market economy (*ibid*). The

additional concern for “elegance” (*thanh lịch*) in Hanoi’s urban development plans is worth reflecting on here because it suggests that, in Hanoi, civility has higher stakes: it must reflect and accentuate the city’s thousand years of heritage. The distinction of Hanoi’s elegant and civilized descendants would thereby confirm Hanoi’s continuing prominence in Vietnamese history, from the past to the present. The use of *thanh lịch* in urban development policies, a term that means “elegant” or “distinguished,” suggests that *văn minh* in Hanoi must be more than just modern and moral but it must also be dignified. To construct such elegance in the city, Hanoi’s policymakers give state institutions greater control over defining and promoting Hanoi’s unique culture. These institutionalized celebrations of culture favor modern architectural symbols of national history, while carefully selecting the local village traditions that are worthy of further maintenance and promotion. Ironically, these symbols of elegance now belong only to the urban sphere of “Hanoi city” even when their origins may actually, and most likely, be rural. As we will see in later, in further analyses of Mễ Trì’s response to these new urban development discourses (Chapter 4), the state’s growing concern with Hanoi’s global representation has fostered joint efforts between government leaders and the local villagers to revitalize a heritage product whose greatest symbolic value lies in its agrarian based narratives and histories.

In practice, the city’s strategies for building an elegant and civilized urban society require the same kinds of land and social transformations as any other urban master plan vision. For these utopian visions to manifest, such urban planning blueprints still necessitate the exclusion and erasure of other land users. As Harms notes in his observation of Thủ Thiêm district’s experience of building urban civility in Hồ Chí Minh City, “Thủ Thiêm had been flattened for the sake of land “clearance” (*giải tỏa*), what is sometimes called “land parcel liberation” (*giải phóng mặt bằng*) or “land reclamation” (*thu hồi đất*). Stripped of euphemism, these words all meant the same thing to

residents: eviction. (Harms 2016a, 155). However, in contrast to Hồ Chí Minh City, urban development in Hanoi rarely leads to the wholesale displacement of populations from their residences. Rather, urban planners are building right on top of formerly agricultural land, which means that existing village land users not only lose their prime economic resource, but, as they become enveloped within the folds of the new urban constructions, these village settlements must also contend with shifting state and public appraisals of their appearances and ways of life. According to these outside evaluations of Mễ Trì, the persistence of village rituals, economies and sociality continues to set the villagers apart from the new urban areas. Although village livelihoods and customs were acceptable when the communities were still classified as “rural,” under the new visions and logic of Hanoi’s extended master plans, formerly rural people and their practices are suddenly rendered incongruous in the changed landscape. Through the gaze of urban planners and state reformers, these enduring village communities are not just eyesores, but they are also seemingly dangerous because their new urban expressions do not fit with the state’s planned visions of urban civility. In Mễ Trì, as with many of the other urbanizing peripheries in Hanoi, these narratives of urban civility have re-made agricultural landscapes into luxurious and modern commercial centers. Simultaneously, such discourses portray the adjacent agrarian villages as the city’s imagined danger zones, full of devious miscreants.

1.3 The Tragedy of Famers-turned-billionaires

A reporter on CafeFVN.com, opening an article entitled “Rich from selling land: Turned billionaires and again impoverished in a flash” (*Giàu nhờ bán đất: Lóe thành tỷ phú lại về bản nông*), writes that, “Mễ Trì is one of the most modern and developed regions in Hanoi currently. But behind those skyscrapers, the lives of Mễ Trì villagers is changing in a *tragic* direction, and there is not yet a way to undo it.” (Tuyết 2012). According to a large number of narratives about

Mễ Trì, and other spaces sharing similar land recovery experiences and socioeconomic conditions, the growth of social and material disorder in the village did not happen because of poverty, but rather, because of its opposite. It was the sudden accumulation of *too much* money by people who, having been rice farmers their entire lives, do not know how to spend money wisely. In an article entitled “Tragedy of Village Billionaires” (*Bì kịch của tỉ phú làng*), published on the online newspaper, Laborers (*Người Lao Động*), a journalist named Nguyễn Thiêm describes the grim future of Mỹ Đình and Mễ Trì ward’s nouveau riche¹²—the landless farmers who have become “billionaires” (*tỉ phú*) overnight from transferring their agricultural land to urban developers. He argues that peoples’ excessive but poorly planned expenditures on homebuilding, rising drug use and gambling, as well as slothful work habits, leave the next generation of village residents with a bleak and impoverished future. Nguyễn notes that the village homes may look wealthy and magnificent now, but in the pockets of villagers, they have nothing left for the future.

According to Nguyễn’s article, the tragedy is that these former rice growers not only lack culture (*văn hóa*), but they are ignorant and skill-less (*văn dốt võ dốt*) and thus unable to even think about investing wisely in resources that would sustain their families and their children’s families for the long-run. What is more, the author suggests that when looking at more money than they had ever seen before, the eager but ignorant villagers quickly turn to hedonistic endeavors. To support his point, Nguyễn relays a number of heartbreakingly “tragic” accounts that capture the village’s current social ills: a despondent mother mourning for the loss of her son who was stabbed by neighbors in a gambling conflict; and a husband who “since the days the land became golden” used his money to feed his drug and gambling addictions until he was eventually sent to prison,

¹² Both wards are in Nam Từ Liêm district and were affected by the same processes of land transformation during construction of the Mỹ Đình Sports Complex.

leaving his wife to raise her two children alone. According to narratives like these, village social problems are the direct result of the villagers' peasant backgrounds; these stories suggest that the villagers' lack of education and imprudent relationship to new consumerist values have together weakened their overall morale and judgement. Without a good sense of morality, then, it is no wonder that the villagers face a gloomy future of poverty and social chaos.

Nguyễn's assessment of the changed material landscape in Mỹ Đình and Mỹ Trì mocks not only the disarray and dirtiness of the spaces, but also the absurdity of the new and majestic houses that have emerged alongside such disorder. A snippet from his highly critical evaluation is worth quoting at length here:

Barefooted billionaires (*tỉ phú chân đất*) spend money like no one else, they compete with one another to tear down old houses and build new 3-4 story houses or French-style villas. Take a tour around Nhan Mỹ, Phú Mỹ (Mỹ Đình) villages or Phú Đô, Mỹ Trì Hạ (Mỹ Trì). Every village is like a construction site, old houses have been torn down and replaced with magnificent houses with all kinds of architecture and all kinds of colors, making village roads which were already small now even more narrow and darker because the two sides (of the road) have too many tall buildings that are taking up the entire space from above. However, it is worth mentioning that, if looking at each house alone, every house appears big and beautiful, however, but it is ***not quite in the city and not quite in the village*** (*không ra phố cũng chẳng ra làng*, meaning, it is not appropriate to consider it as part of either category) because it ***lacks overall planning*** (*thiếu sự quy hoạch tổng thể*). The roads in the village are still narrow and cramped, uneven, dirty and repugnant. On both sides, there are open sewers with various kinds of black waste so that when it is sunny outside, a strong putrid smell emerges. In the rainy season, there is no water system, so waste water freely spreads all over the village, and those with low houses must suffer flooding. The strangest thing are the houses in the alleys that had gardens that have cut and sold their gardens and should have thought of all the possible means of ***"planning"*** (*quy hoạch*) so that every piece of land has a walkway. (ibid)

According to the logic of these kinds of appraisals, which pervade the media and public discourse on Hanoi's village transformations, disordered and dysfunctional village spaces arise due to a lack of *planning*. Unlike the carefully designed skyscrapers and shopping centers of urban master plans, these self-built village mansions lack a rational and coordinated long-term strategy,

which therefore contributes to its unsightly and chaotic appearance. Moreover, Nguyễn's narrative suggests that because they lack formal planning, places like Mễ Trì cannot be considered as fully urban, but rather, lie somewhere between "village" and "city." As I will point out later, this is also how villagers have come to characterize their present status, although in more positive terms. Such claims also align with enduring and popular perspectives in Vietnam regarding farmers/peasants (*nông dân*) as backwards and uncivilized. Commensurate with such a viewpoint, Mễ Trì is unable to be truly urban, despite its urban administrative status in the city of Hanoi, because the community of residents living in the space are predominantly *nông dân* who still live with a *nông dân* mentality.

A quick scroll through the "Urban Construction and Management" section of Nam Từ Liêm District's government website shows that state officials are also acutely concerned about the disordered condition of urban villages like Mễ Trì. Describing specific examples of violations to urban civility and order, state media points to the everyday sidewalk encroachments that enable villagers to sustain their livelihoods of providing goods and services to the local and migrant community, such things as: tables and benches, roofs made of tarp, billboards, posters, kiosks, drink stands, etc. To rectify such violations, the year 2017 in Nam Từ Liêm was deemed "The year of urban civility and order" ("*Năm trật tự văn minh đô thị*") during which time the district had mobilized 10,327 business operating households to sign commitments that they would not violate urban order and civility (Quang 2017). In 2017, Mễ Trì Ward's Peoples' Committee also made greater strides towards building "elegant and civilized Hanoians" as to change the behaviors of their citizens, particularly in traffic (respecting the traffic laws), culture of public communication (not speaking too loudly), and developing a "cultured lifestyle" (*nếp sống văn hóa*) through proper waste management practices and the avoidance of trade on the urban sidewalks (Thế 2017). The

underlying idea behind such campaigns is that active *planning* and policy-making will make these village spaces and its people civilized and ordered, and thus, appropriately urban.

As an ideology that also informs socialist policymaking, Hanoi's discourse of *văn minh đô thị* legitimizes land dispossession and conversion in zones in urban peripheries for the moral, social and economic development of society, suggesting that a *planned* form of urban development will modernize and moralize the remaining peasants that currently contaminate the city. Vietnam's moralizing discourse on urban civility resonates with D. Asher Ghertner's argument about "rule by aesthetics," which he constructed based on fieldwork on Delhi's slums (Ghertner 2015). Rule by aesthetics refers to a mode of urban governance that uses aesthetic preferences for commercially planned ("world-class") infrastructures as a standard for determining the legality of urban constructions: "if a development project looks "world-class," then it is most often declared planned; if a settlement looks polluting, it is sanctioned as unplanned and illegal" (Ghertner 2011 280). Like urban civility, this "rule by aesthetics" logic justifies state improvement (or in Delhi, state demolition) of low-class settlements based on state planners' visual assessments that such places are dirty and unruly, as compared to buildings and infrastructures born out of formal plans and urban blueprints. Such mode of urban governance assumes that the appearance of spatial disorder is causally related to social disorders, such as environmental degradation and poverty; further; it deduces that the growth of such kinds of lower-class settlements, akin to Davis' "planet of slums" (2006), result from proliferating informal actions and the inefficient application of urban policy.

State and media narrative constructions of Hanoi's villages as disordered and uncivilized spaces also employ pre-conceived suppositions about what counts as "formal" and "informal" types of economic and construction activities. The concept of informality that currently shapes

state and public assessments of urban land use and economic activities draws on particular assumptions about the relationship between urban designs and the empirical process of urban development. State and public discourses view certain practices of using land and space (e.g., building kiosks and small rental units) as “informal” and thus aesthetically disagreeable because they emerge outside of state policies and urban master plans. As the *Laborer’s* journalist, Nguyễn Thiêm had surmised: when viewed from the perspective of state policymaker, the problem of disorder and incivility in the villages is that they *lack any overall planning*. In general, the idea that villages “lack of planning” is about more than simply the physical state of these formerly agrarian villages; state concerns about the absence of planning also lay out a particular kind of evaluation about the villages’ social conditions. According to such a perspective, the villagers’ inability to plan for the future, and the local administration’s deficient programs for governing peoples’ public activities is to blame for the village’s cultural shortfalls— its “tragedies.” Ultimately, according to the pervasive state and media narrative, local governments can help to re-shape Hanoi’s notorious peri-urban danger zones through hegemonic forms of intervention, discipline, and propaganda. Yet, given the importance of cheap boarding rooms and services for sustaining the urban migrant work force that now supports the city’s growing economy, it remains unclear whether such civilizing projects will ever reach their expected results.

1.4 Imported Evils

In Mễ Trì, villagers typically joked that they would run bankrupt if not for the swarm of migrant residents that rent rooms in the village. “We live off of the boarding rooms,” they would say, *sống bằng trọ*. Since the early 2000s, Mễ Trì has become a popular site for students and laborers to rent cheap boarding spaces given the close proximity of the village to the universities in Cầu Giấy district and to the central districts of Hanoi. Villagers that have extra space in their

front yards build additional rental homes, and some have even bought more houses or land in the village to secure extra rental income. Village alleyways and telephone poles are often plastered with fliers advertising vacant spaces for rent, and some people have even suggested that online advertisement was not necessary given their constant stream of direct personal referrals to new tenants. Mễ Trì landlords offer a variety of boarding house types, including basic dormitory style rooms of no more than 16 square meters, all-inclusive “mini-apartments,” and some three to four-story family homes. As a result of the proliferation of rental spaces, the village landscape is crammed with three-to-five story tube houses (*nhà ống*¹³), each of them squeezed tightly next to the others—precluding the possibility of side and back windows (see also Nguyễn 2014; Labbe 2014). Although the villagers have mixed feelings about the consequences of renting out boarding rooms, in general, they agree that is a highly profitable opportunity, with some landlords earning around 20-30 million VND (approximately \$856-1,285 USD) per month from just one rental building alone. Given the financial benefits that such newcomer residents bring to Mễ Trì, most people have accepted a changing village atmosphere, even while they simultaneously groan about some of the adverse social consequences of welcoming outsiders.

Prior to the recent decade of urban changes, Mễ Trì villagers recall intimate relations of mutual trust and familiarity between neighbors and community members in and between the two hamlets. Villagers would recognize strangers immediately and allow young children to wander knowing that others in the village would keep out watchful eyes. As one Mễ Trì Hạ woman described it, village sociality was so affectionate and close-knit that, “If the neighbor’s children came by while we were eating, they would be invited [to eat], [we would tell them,] ‘come in and have a meal!’ Many villagers recalled that neighbors would share their meager meals of rice and

¹³ See footnote 3 for the definition of tube houses.

vegetables together; however, these days, villagers hardly recognize all of the people who come in and out of the alleyways into the boarding rooms during the early mornings and late evenings. “How could I be acquainted with them?” Cô Liên, a *cóm* seller from Mễ Trì Hạ responded, when asked if she knew the new residents in her alleyway, “In the morning, they leave to go to work early. My daughter-in-law has a few [boarding] rooms [in her house] but I don’t know the names of the people who rent them. I know their faces, but I don’t know their names.” As Cô Liên noted, the village has become so crowded with unfamiliar people that even casual socialization in the alleyways has become more difficult and infrequent. Comparing past and present social interactions, Mễ Trì villagers recount similar experiences with the village’s changing social atmosphere: “in the past, children went out, and everyone talked to them. People talked to whoever they ran into [in the alleys] because the people in the village knew each other. But now, when we go out on the street, no one knows anyone.” Villagers often refer to the new tenants as “strangers” (*người lạ*) or “outsiders” (*người ngoài*), which emphasizes their feelings of unfamiliarity and distance in relation to their non-Mễ Trì neighbors.

The growing social distance between village residents—both new and native—is not only felt on the streets, but it also shapes and is simultaneously shaped by the changing material structure of village homes. Older Mễ Trì villagers describe earlier renditions of their neighborhood layout to be unconfined, with walkways and courtyards that spilled between individual houses, which were separated only by small fences made of trees and shrubs. As Thím, a *cóm* producer living in Mễ Trì Hạ explained to me, “in the past, we could go from this house to the other; we just went from this house to the next. There was no need to go to the main road; we just went straight through.” Previous openness and connectivity between village homes resulted from feelings of mutual confidence and intimacy between community members whose families have become

intertwined through many generations of living side-by-side. As such, the coming and going of neighbors was an expected and commonplace part of everyday life and still exists in some quarters of Mễ Trì, where there is a greater density of native residents. However, nowadays, houses in Mễ Trì are enclosed behind metal gates that are locked from the inside, even when the residents are at home. Thím, who has blockaded the doorways and windows of her house with metal rods for extra protection told me, “Nowadays more and more new people have come here to live here, and we can’t tell whether he or she is a good or bad person, so we have to lock the door.” Villagers have constructed these gates, locks and barricades to protect themselves from the dangers brought about by the village’s new and unfamiliar inhabitants. Such security precautions have also led to the emergence of a functional aesthetic that is ubiquitous to Mễ Trì village, as well as in other villages in Hanoi, represented by dense blocks of shadowy housing units, whose inhabitants are connected only by a singular alleyway in front of their locked doors.

Mễ Trì villagers explain that they have installed locked metal gates and window barricades primarily to prevent thievery, which they argue only began to occur in the village as a result of opening up to new tenants. Mr. Khoa, whose Mễ Trì Hạ home is surrounded by new rental buildings told me, “there are so many apartments for rent that it is hard to keep track [of new people]. So now we are more cautious.” “If you don’t put your guard up then they might steal something, those *người ngoài*!” His wife added, in a scornful whisper. Though they welcome the additional income from boarding rooms that allows them to buy the latest brand of motorbikes for their children, people in Mễ Trì also express frustration towards their new neighbors, feeling as their earlier village atmosphere of trust and shared vigilance between community members has been replaced by individualized precautions and general anxiety over the possibility of burglars and criminals. For the most part, villagers worry about losing their property, as Youth Union

Secretary Dung explains:

Dung: In the old days, we did not need to lock the gates; we would not lose anything. Nowadays, if we don't lock them, then we will lose them (the motorbikes). Now when I go [out], I open the gate and then I lock the gate. When I come home, I will unlock and lock the gate again. If I don't, when I come home, then they will tow away all of the motorbikes.

Yet, village outsiders were not only considered to be the cause of petty thievery, but they were also often blamed for other kinds of insecurity and social disorder, such as violence and kidnapping. While he remembers roaming freely between neighborhood homes as a child, Dung admits that he feels uncomfortable allowing for his children to do the same in today's village alleyways.

Youth Union Secretary Dung: In general, from the day [the village] urbanized, there have been a lot of safety issues. It is not like how it was in the old day; there is sometimes kidnapping, sometimes thievery—that did not happen often [before] but now it happens a lot. There is a loss of order in safety. For example, there is fighting and conflict. [If we] just go out into the street, [we see] conflict between people, there are fights.

Emily: there are many people who are not people from this area.

Youth Union Secretary Dung: that's right. We don't feel at peace (because of that). People often tell the children, "just play at someone's house that we know." The neighbors, some of the households are new, then we don't trust them yet.

As Youth Union Secretary Dung points out, Mẽ Trì's changing safety levels result, not only from the "strangers" but also from the urbanization that promulgated the village's shifting demographics.

Villagers are often concerned that the new influences from the "outside" are leading to the overhaul and corruption of Mẽ Trì's cultural and moral values. While most people admit that misbehaving individuals can be both outside renters and Mẽ Trì villagers alike, they often suggest that harmful conduct comes mostly from external sources:

Youth Union Secretary Dung: There are many streams of influence...the social evils are imported into the village. Now, there is drug addiction [...] now people use meth, but in general, it is only a few [people who do that]. The strangers bring these things in. Perhaps a number of people from the village [may bring them in too], after going somewhere else—to another region—they come back here and they also bring these things with them, the vices. And gradually, they spread it to the young people in the village.

While villagers like Youth Union Secretary Dung often contend that “social evils” such as drug use, theft, and gambling arose during the onset of urbanization, the corrupt “outsiders” to which they refer are primarily migrants coming from rural provinces. Because the influx of rural migrants who are moving from surrounding provinces into Hanoi’s peri-urban villages, there are growing concerns among Hanoian residents, including the urban villagers who live in adjoining spaces such as Mễ Trì, about the “ruralization of the city” (*nông thôn hoá đô thị*) (Tana 1996, 45). The concept of *nông thôn hoá đô thị* suggests that rural peoples do not just disturb urban dwellers with their immoral and uncivilized ways of life, but they also corrupt others who are trying to become honest and disciplined modern people. The idea is that rural migrants coming into cities bring with them a “crisis in urban manners,” which would essentially reverse state efforts of modernizing the city and its people (Harms 2011, 212). As such, villagers actually imply that such social evils are neither wholly urban nor an entirely rural phenomena, but rather, they result from the actions and influence of the “wrong” kind of people, namely rural peoples who have been historically distanced from Hanoi’s urban core both in cultural and economic terms.

In such a context, establishing narrative ties to Hanoi has become an important strategy for rural peoples to gain legitimate belonging and acceptance in the urban sphere. As we will see in subsequent chapters, villagers often draw on Mễ Trì village’s longstanding ties to the capital to

express an understanding of themselves as more culturally and morally intertwined with Hanoi,¹⁴ rather than the rural provinces that surround them. These narrative associations with the city would therefore make them blameless for Hanoi's emerging social evils, even despite their recent agrarian histories. Nevertheless, when reflecting on the misconduct of their own people, Mễ Trì villagers are eager to contend that there are certain kinds of behaviors for which their agrarian roots and traditions act as the distinctive antidote. According to villagers, incidences of gambling, political corruption, and fraud in Mễ Trì are caused by the nefarious and uncontrolled influence of capitalist values on the moral pathways of otherwise intrinsically virtuous people. In other words, village narratives demonstrate that "social evil" in Mễ Trì arose because shifts in the material economic fabric of the village led certain people to deviate from previous relations of production that were fundamentally moralizing.

1.5 Market moralities

"Social evils" are a recurring topic of conversation among middle-aged and elderly Mễ Trì people, particularly in their rumination of village life prior to the onset of urban development. Such concerns with "social evils" reflect state-led campaigns to instill particular ideas about social and moral order into the Vietnamese populace since the mid-1990s and early 2000s, after the implementation of the Doi Moi economic reforms (see for example Robert 2005 and Rydstrøm 2009). Similar to socialist state leaders, Mễ Trì villagers also feel anxiety towards the negative impacts of Hanoi's urban capitalist relations, wherein gambling and corrupt land management often stand out as their foremost worries. When explaining to me the reprehensible actions of fellow villagers who have gone astray in the recent decades of urbanization, my informants

¹⁴ Ironically, as we will see in this dissertation, Mễ Trì's moral and cultural linkages with Hanoi is deeply embedded in their practice of producing a patently rural, agricultural product: rice.

emphasized that the land market is the inextricable and noxious force behind the bulk of Mễ Trì's contemporary social problems. According to them, the problem is that people's ideas towards land are changing; land is no longer a resource to sustain livelihood. Instead, it is a commodity that gives people easy access to limited supplies of wealth, making them suddenly rich, without requiring the appropriate labor demands for long-term sustainability of their livelihoods. What's more, the newly acquired wealth changed some peoples' consumptive activities, making themselves and their families even more vulnerable to potential economic shocks.

Bác Tùng: When there was no urbanization, the land here was only 30 million VND per square meters. But now, since everything is urbanized, the highest price for land is 300 million per square meters. You see, it has been jacked up in price and has spoiled many people. If you don't have too much [money], you wouldn't spend much and spoil yourself. Now, with a big sack of money to spend, money [that you get from land] will spoil you; you spend it on unhealthy things. People who have 500 meters of land, they can sell 100 meters [of it] and it brings them billions.

Emily: ...some families made a lot of money.

Bác Tùng: Yeah, in the end they spend it all.

Emily: All the money or all the land?

Bác Tùng's wife: The land.

Bác Tùng: All the money, all the land. They got used to having fun and gambling.

Ngoc, colleague from USSH: [As is] the common culture in Mễ Trì and Mỹ Đình areas

Bác Tùng: You see, urbanization is toxic. If not because of the urbanization, the land price wouldn't go up and there would be no money [here]. No money, no spending [on things] and it would not have affected the people. (laughs)

In my above discussion with Bác Tùng of Mễ Trì Thượng, Bác Tùng's description about peoples' relationship with land and money reflects the "tragedy of billionaires" narrative that the Vietnamese media tell about places like Mễ Trì. In Mễ Trì's version of this narrative, urbanization

was indeed the fire that fueled such tragic shifts in land use and capital accumulation; however, Mễ Trì people also contend that the tragic turn of certain village members did not result from any inherent flaws or pre-disposed inclinations. More importantly, they make it clear that their peasant backgrounds did not cause such social problems to arise. Rather, social evil resulted from peoples' misguided attitudes towards work following their sudden acquisition of wealth through the land market. The problem, they argue, is that many people are “playing” (*ăn chơi*) instead of “working,” which is not intrinsic to the values and character of Mễ Trì people, whose ancestors are accustomed to arduous labor. As 29-year-old mother of two, Như pointed out to me, the most obvious material sign that a village household is dealing with misguided youth is the physical structure of the house itself:

The youth in this village—including my husband before we married—from the year of '88-'89-'90 to 2005 have all been corrupted. Because when the urbanization started, [the people] lost their land--their fields--and their children were just spending money all around. If you play a lot (*ăn chơi*), money will run out; betting on soccer games, gambling or playing the lottery is just a part of it. In 2004-2005, when this village was just getting better (wealthier), all the young people became corrupted. Because they played with the money; their parents have to pay off the debt by selling [more] property. Here, as you see, there are so many narrow houses. As for my family, my parents did not sell any inch of land, so my house is very wide. But like my husband's family, for example, that place was split into two (part of it was sold).

Như explained that the families that were not hit by the tragedies brought upon by their children could maintain larger homes which they would be able to use for making *cóm*, running small businesses, or, at the very least, for building boarding homes for rent. Other less fortune families had to divide up their remaining residential land (*chia đất*) to sell in order to pay back the debts of irresponsible family members. Villagers noted that urbanization did not only foment tragedy through the transformation of land into large amounts of capital, but—in the process of doing so—it also dismantled agriculture as a source of income as well as moral guidance. As one local cadre

leader emphasized to me, “without agriculture, many people stay at home and ‘play around’ (*chơi bời*) instead of doing trained jobs,” therefore, naturally, gambling and other vices would arise.

Mễ Trì villagers suggest that those who use the land market to acquire swift and easy money also incur negative social and moral situations upon themselves and their families. In their ideas about land and social evils, villagers advance a kind of discourse that reflects a broader national attitude towards affluence—specifically, capitalist affluence. A number of Vietnam scholars have discovered in their own individual research on the moral impacts of the Đổi Mới market reforms that contemporary Vietnamese “pursue market opportunities with unbridled enthusiasm” (Jellema 2005, 235); however, given the socialist state’s earlier disparagement of private commercial activities, the same market enthusiasts also maintain strong feelings of ambivalence towards entrepreneurial wealth (see Malarney 1998; Abrami 2002; Jellema *ibid*; Horat 2017). These latter scholars found that socialism’s distaste for private commerce continues to shape how Vietnamese traders discursively rationalize both their economic practices as well as the profits. For example, in Horat and Abrami’s respective studies on textile traders in Ninh Hiệp village of Hanoi, the authors show that the traders often portray themselves as peasants pursuing small-scale “traditional occupations” (*theo làng nghề*) with subsistence returns, regardless of the scale of their activities or profits (*ibid*). The Ninh Hiệp traders’ claims about the work’s meager profits and collective social benefits expresses their uncertainty towards the moral implications of trade as an economic pursuit. This disquietude reinforces Jellema’s (2005) suggestion which states that, “at the heart of Vietnamese anxiety about the post-revolutionary age is not the novel availability of wealth per se or even its unequal distribution, but rather deep uncertainties about how to be at once wealthy and good” (235). Such anxieties towards commerce as well as private wealth may therefore explain why Mễ Trì people today attribute the village’s sudden moral

tragedies with the high volumes of money that village members attained from selling their land.

Villagers were also disquieted by the radical shifts in spending practices of people who suddenly accumulated wealth through the land market. Such ambivalence is most obvious in their evaluations of those village youth who, as Nhur and others pointed out, had squandered away family wealth and land in order to pay off gambling debts. In addition to gambling, many people were also concerned that the younger generation, being accustomed to a comfortable amount of family wealth, were developing an unhealthy relationship with money and its value. “Over time, [these young people] have a different way of thinking about money,” Nhur admitted to me. To give a more concrete example of her point, she noted that village children no longer accept small bills during the Lunar New Year tradition of receiving lucky money, “*lỳ sì*,” from village elders.

In the past, children were happy about receiving lucky money, but now, they won't take small bills because their family already has a lot (of those small bills); they only take larger bills. Why are the children like that? That is a very big question. How do children [even] know if a bill is big? Because parents teach them this. When they get lucky money, they will say that they only like big bills, not small bills. The adults put this idea in the minds of the children; nobody else.

In Nhur's assessment of young peoples' changing mindsets towards money, she notes that it is primarily the fault of the money-earning adults who have not educated their children on the value of hard-earned money. Like Nhur, villagers worried about the future of those young people who not only have costlier tastes and habits, but who have also never expended energy on making money themselves. Youth Union Secretary Dung's mother describes this predicament through a comparison between her own attitudes towards consumption and the attitudes of other villagers, the latter of which she argues, are wasteful:

For me, for example, I only use 2 or 3 pairs of clothes in a year. But [others] will throw away clothes that are still usable and waste [money] on new clothes, or they will buy two thousand (VND) worth of food when they only need one thousand. They won't finish [the food] so they throw it away, and that is such a waste! They don't have any job; they don't

do anything—they don't want to! —so they have to stop [spending so wastefully], or they will definitely go downhill.¹⁵

Opinions such as these show that villagers are anxious about the way in which the land market may have shifted village mentalities towards labor and capital.

Such worries indicate that the loss of agricultural land is also erasing Mễ Trì's tradition of hard work, which not only sustains household livelihoods, but also and more importantly, serves as a form of moral guidance. As the older villagers often stressed, in order to do agriculture, one must possess both the mental and physical strength to endure hardships (*chịu khó*) as well as the mindfulness to put extreme care into the work. These descriptions of agricultural labor show that the activity serves to strengthen and build a person's moral character. In later chapters (Chapter 3 and 4), we will see that Mễ Trì villagers also impart this understanding of virtuous labor onto *cốm* production as well. Landlordism is an occupation that often sits uneasily within Mễ Trì peoples' ideal frameworks on morality and labor because it is a highly profitable form of capital production that requires such little labor effort that many landlords appear to be just idly “playing around.” Although the majority of villages who have the space and money to build boarding rooms and houses will do so, many people contend that landlordism is only a “supplement” to their more demanding jobs of running mini kiosks, selling food and drinks, or producing *cốm*. To them, even the slight impression of being idle threatens their moral standing.

Hoa's grandmother: There are people who rent out houses here, who do not go to the market (*đi chợ*).¹⁶ There are people who are like that; they don't accept hard work. If they have a little bit of land, then they would sell a bit of it and build up a house—5 stories, 10 stories—to rent, and they spend that money, so they don't have to go to the market. But there are people who work hard, those people feel that it is a waste of money (*tiết đồng tiền*) [to sell land] and they go to the market.

¹⁵ By “downhill”, she means that they will become immoral.

¹⁶ In Vietnam, the notion of going to the market, (*đi chợ*) refers to a range of sales activities that may or may sometimes involve selling items at a physical market, but increasingly, can also refer to online or home-based sales.

While many villagers sneered at those “others” whose dependence on boarding has given these people ample time to “sit around all day to play and eat,” I ultimately never met a single villager who admitted to either living solely off of boarding room payments, or to having “free time.” Nearly everyone in Mễ Trì appeared to have limited time to help me with my projects due to their preoccupation with various types of small businesses (*kinh doanh nhỏ*).

These days, Mễ Trì people still claim to carry on the tradition of virtuous hard work in such capitalist forms of labor, which are increasingly entrepreneurial in nature. What this suggests is that villagers do not necessarily associate capitalism with immorality per se, but rather, they perceive that the divergent pathways towards virtue and social evil depend on how one operates in relation to new capitalist demands and values. Mễ Trì’s traditions of labor serve as one form of moral re-edification that redirects misguided younger generations towards the virtuous pathway. Villagers believed that their penchant for hard work made Mễ Trì different—superior even—to other peri-urban villages in Hanoi.

Bác Tùng: Nowadays, it is like this: here, things are just normal. People who get 1 billion for example, will rebuild their house, and there is no more money left to squander. Everyone uses their money to build [their house] and no one leaves their money to “play.”

Ngọc: Yes. I am just thinking of people who say that, for example, Mễ Trì Hạ or in the case of Phú Mỹ¹⁷ over here—

Bác Tùng: Phú Mỹ, Nhân Mỹ... it is scary over there; people don’t work there. They just squander all of their money there! People over there are scary; they don’t work, they just spend their money.

Ngọc: They squander. Over there, there are many boarding houses. But over here, there aren’t any situations like that...

¹⁷ Phú Mỹ and Nhân Mỹ are two villages in the adjacent region of Mỹ Đình, which have become well-known in the public eye for providing cheap rental units to migrant workers.

Bác Tùng: No, there aren't.

Like Bác Tùng, most people in Mễ Trì agreed that urbanization and the land market had led to the tragedy of billionaires in many places in Hanoi. Nevertheless, they were sure that such a situation has never occurred in Mễ Trì.

1.6 Conclusion: The village as an escape

When reflecting on the wide-reaching effects of urbanization on Mễ Trì people, a significant number of villagers expressed optimism towards the moral status of their village, suggesting that those who had fallen down the path of gambling and other social evils were merely village aberrations—"only 5 or 6 delinquents out of a thousand people." Such villagers affirmed that Mễ Trì's ethical foundation is resilient and therefore still capable of producing principled and disciplined youth.

Bác Tùng: in here, we don't need to educate the kids, they still keep customs from the past. Here, the young people—I can count on my fingers—they don't get addicted to drugs or alcohol; they don't imitate people outside who dye their hair. Even the girls here never wear short skirts out on the street.

The more conservative Bác Tùng of Mễ Trì Thượng often complained about the revealing and eccentric clothes of Hanoi youth. Yet, for Bác Tùng, dyed hair and short skirts were not just un-felicitous forms of attire for young men and women living in the village, but such appearances also symbolized the dominance of outside influences over village traditions. Because Bác Tùng had never witnessed young people walking about in Mễ Trì dressed in short skirts or with dyed hair, he was confident that village traditions still played a paramount role in the moral development of younger generations. "It is because of our land (*đất*) and our lifestyle (*lối sống*)" Bác Tùng explained, "The adults, when they see their children behave like that, they will tell them and teach them the [right] way. That is how it is here, unlike in the other areas where, despite how much the

adults talk about it, [the children] don't care." In other words, Bác Tùng believed that Mễ Trì would retain the village's high moral standards amidst the processes of urban change because of something inherent in the character of Mễ Trì people—something that is embedded in their land and the lifestyles. This intrinsic quality would assure that young people in Mễ Trì lived according to the guidance of their elders, instead of following the superficial ideals of their urban peers.

While villagers envisioned that village customs would act as a robust moral buffer to social evils, they did not hold completely insular views with respect to Hanoi's social and cultural influences on their people. Mễ Trì peoples' explanations about the benefits of Hanoi's urban changes reflect pervasive state and public ideas about civility and its production in the city's new "modern" and "elegant" urban spaces. Living within the boundaries of Hanoi's urban master plans meant that Mễ Trì villagers also acquire some of the “civilized” cultural and behavioral tendencies associated with an urban space. When asked if she thought the village carried any "*nhà quê*”¹⁸ (rural/peasant) characteristics, Mrs. Hà of Mễ Trì Hạ stressed to me that those days were over:

Mrs. Hà: It is completely civilized, as I said. But with regards to “*nhà quê*,” what you’re talking about is how it was in the old days; it is about “backwardness” (*lạc hậu*). That doesn’t exist anymore. Even the older women [in the village] now have to follow the times (*theo thời thế*); the backwards times are over. In the past, the older women used to [act like a typical] mother-in-law of the bride, but nowadays we are civilized and no one pays attention [to that role] anymore. Now, if it was like it used to be in the past, then they would make children [follow the demands of] these older women. But nowadays, no one makes any demands; you can do whatever you want (*ai thích làm thế nào thì làm*). It is completely civilized; it is not backwards like the past.

Here, Mrs. Hà points to the changed behavior of village mother-in-laws as an example of Mễ Trì 's growing “civility.” The purpose of her description is to show that, while Vietnamese

¹⁸ In its literal translation, *nhà quê* means, “house in the village/countryside,” but the term is primarily used as an insult that links uncivilized beliefs and behaviors to peasants’ anachronistic lifestyle

mother-in-laws stereotypically have strict and domineering relationships with brides who move into homes of the groom's family, Mễ Trì mother-in-laws do not carry on such "backwards" (*lạc hậu*) traditions. At a broader level, Mrs. Hà's example shows that some village traditions, which are connected to the village's rural past, are not to be maintained in the urban and civilized present. These particular village traditions are not only parochial, but they would make the village appear backwards and even primitive. More importantly, her rejection of such traditions implicitly suggests that the maintenance of conservative ideas would not contribute to the development of a virtuous person.

These days, Mễ Trì villagers regularly proclaim that young people in Mễ Trì need to "*ra ngoài xã hội*"— go into the greater society, or more specifically, into urban society—in order to advance themselves intellectually, economically, as well as morally. Under the changing social and material circumstances of urban development and a reformed economy, villagers aspire that their children follow lucrative non-agricultural jobs in the city center, especially because, as Malarney aptly pointed out, "creating wealth not only improved the material circumstances of the family but was also a measure of fealty to the parents or ancestors"(Malarney 1998, 275). Villagers idealize that young people will not only be educated, but that they will possess knowledge that expands beyond the village perimeters; as such, Mễ Trì families are eager for their children to *ra ngoài xã hội* in order to gain respect and social standing with the community. They praise children who have completed university and gained careers in the city, while casting cold eyes onto the others who stay at home to "play around" and waste money. Moreover, given the loss of agricultural land, the virtue of hard work cannot be pursued by staying enclosed in the village; it necessitates both openness to the outside economy as well as the abandonment of parochial ideas. In the context of urban change, Mễ Trì people accept that morality also necessitates civility (*văn*

minh), which therefore requires certain urban appropriations. In other words, becoming virtuous was about getting the right balance of influence from the village as well as the village's more urban exterior.

This careful tug-of-war between village traditions and external urban influences shows that Mễ Trì's identity-making actions of synergizing village traditions and outside influences work to re-produce pre-existing rural-urban dichotomies, which waver between denigrative and celebratory imaginations of the rural and the urban.¹⁹ On the one hand, villagers, like Mrs. Hà, may disparage old customs that paint villagers as "backwards, while commending the influence of new urban values for adding to the increased civility of the village. This understanding about the relationship between tradition and civility reflects a linear and spatially-divided concept of social progress: the past/the rural village is uncivilized, and hence primitive; and the present/the urban village is civilized, and hence modern. Yet, at other times, people, such as Bác Tùng, may refer back to village traditions that evoke the imagined "purity" and "virtue" of the rural past, as an escape and panacea for problems that arose during the village's experience of urbanization. Perhaps Mễ Trì's vacillation between urban and rural ideals is even more pronounced because Mễ Trì villagers feel as though they exist in a place that is a combination of two social-spatial forms.

Like the reporter who described Mễ Trì as "*not quite in the city and not quite in the village*," Mễ Trì people also claim that Mễ Trì is "half-village half-city," *nửa làng nửa phố*. As Youth Union Secretary Dung described to me, "[Mễ Trì] has not kept all of the habits of the countryside; it is still half this half that. It is not entirely urbanized [either]." Mễ Trì's sociocultural and spatial fusion of the village and the city is the source of their unique maneuvering power over the exigencies and pitfalls of contemporary urban transformations. Like the Hóc Môn denizens who can maneuver

¹⁹Harms (2011) refers to such concurring categorial imaginations as a "double symbolism.

between their rural and urban orientations in their position at the margins of Hồ Chí Minh City (Harms 2011), Mễ Trì villagers—as members of a place that is half-village and half city—are also able to transcend the limitations of rural and urban categories. As Harms (ibid) points out in his conception of "social edginess," the possibility to oscillate between these two socio-spatial forms represents a unique symbolic and material power:

Both poles in this set of oppositions have potential advantages and disadvantages. If one could somehow harness the potentials and escape the limitations of both idealized poles, one could become a master of time and space; one could be traditional and modern, sentimental and sophisticated, carefree and efficient [...] One could wield the legitimate authority of tradition and embrace the rationalized wisdom of the future (Harms 2011, 121)

As the capital's former royal rice supplier and craft producer, Mễ Trì villagers draw on their longstanding economic and cultural connections to Hanoi in order to fit themselves into the city's new narrative of urban civility (elegance, modernity and order). At the same time, villagers continue to claim that their agricultural heritage provides them a strong moral foundation to work hard and persevere over capitalism's negative social influences. As this dissertation will show, Mễ Trì's contemporary practices of producing young rice, or *cốm*, represent the village's ultimate strategy for maneuvering its rural-urban orientations. *Cốm* production has not only helped them to carve out new meaningful roles and places of belonging in Hanoi's reformed economy, but it has also helped them to address moral anxieties that come out of the village's recent urban transformations.

Images



Image 5: An advertisement for a rental space hangs from a telephone pole in Mễ Trì's alleyway.

Chapter Two- From village fields to household factories: the transformation and development of Mễ Trì's *cốm* craft

2.1 Introduction:

On a humid morning in late September of 2017, Youth Union Secretary Dung drove me and my assistant, Tâm, out to the last remaining patch of Mễ Trì's rice fields. Dung's neighbor Thiên, a lanky middle-aged *cốm* producer with a perpetually stern grimace, guided us on motorbike from his house to these fields, which are enclosed behind a long stretch of aluminum fence next to the Láng Hòa Lạc highway. While the rice growing land in this area had been earmarked for another urban residential project, the developer's lack of funds enabled the villagers to continue temporarily using the space for cultivating rice. Those with land near the roadside also found profitable opportunities to allow outsiders to rent their land for setting up makeshift soccer fields. In recent years since losing his own farmland, Thiên had made an agreement with a small group of village rice cultivators in this area to provide him with one *sào* (360 square meters) worth of sticky rice grains for making *cốm* in the Fall season. When the grains were ready for harvesting, Thiên came to cut down the crops and transport them, on his motorbike, back up the road to his home for further processing. Unlike the harvest of regular rice grains, *cốm* rice grains are harvested when the fields are still green and not yet dried out from the aging process; *cốm* growers and producers are experts at determining the precise time to harvest before their grains start to lose their plump green color. On the morning of the harvest that year, I watched Thiên and two female villagers harvest the ripened rice crops with their sharp sickles as the sun emerged from behind the urban construction sites in the distance. The harvesters worked swiftly, wrapping armfuls of rice crops into large bundles and stacking them next to the slippery dirt ledges surrounding the plots. After only half an hour of harvesting, the field was entirely cleared and a barefooted and grinning

Thiên began to carry the heaps of rice across the muddy paths to his motorbike [**Image 6**].

When the three by four-foot stack of rice bundles was tightly secured to the back of Thiên's motorbike, Dung, Tâm and I followed him back through the village archway and towards their neighborhood. There, at the opening of a cramped alleyway in front of Thiên's home, a boisterous crowd of (mostly elderly) women were already waiting for us to arrive. They immediately swarmed the arriving rice carriage, almost knocking Thiên from his seat. The women grabbed at the rice bundles that were tied to the back seat of Thiên's motorbike, pushing, tugging and yelling insults at one another to secure their share of the crops. The other neighbors in the alleyway stood at their doorways, dressed in pajamas, with their hands perched on their hips, watching in cheerful amusement at this familiar village event.

When every single one of the fighting women had received her share of the crops, each of them crouched down at their previous positions on the cement ground in the alleyway and in the front yard of Thiên's house to gather and line the individual rice stalks into neat handfuls. Their fingers worked through the straws with swift dexterity in rhythmic motions: first picking individual pieces from the pile, lining the stalk into their palm, and then pulling the prickly leaves away from the bottom half of the straw, *pick-line-pull, pick-line-pull*. After re-organizing the crops into these small and tidy bundles, the women queued behind Thiên's electric thresher, a large machine composed of a spiked metal cylinder that separates the individual grains from the stalks as it rotates beneath the bundles of rice [**Image 7**]. The women continued to tease and push at one another as they impatiently waited for their respective turns at the thresher. When the bundles of rice hit the rotating wheel, the machine sent the green rice grains flying in all directions of the yards. Later in the day, these grains were collected, washed, and then roasted on the wood fire stove—on their way towards becoming Mễ Tri's prized *cốm*. Meanwhile, the neighbor women walked away

clutching their own prizes, of cleanly threshed rice straws.

As I later learned, these women had taken the straws to dry on the pavement outside of the village perimeter, where I had noticed them the previous month. They would later spend days twisting the green stalks into small handmade brooms that sell for 30,000 Vietnamese Dong (~\$1.30 USD) in the village market. “Fighting to gather straws” (*tranh nhau để nhặt lúa*)” is a celebrated village event during the Fall *cốm* season when the entire village (or, at least 90% of people, as many often clarified) would concentrate on producing *cốm* to sell for the mid-Autumn festival (Tết Trung Thu). “There used be even more fighting!” Hoa told me later that day, after I had debriefed with her the events of the morning over our usual orders of bubble tea. We decided to drive five minutes into Thanh Xuân district to sit in an airconditioned tea shop and sip on sugar-filled fruit teas to escape the noise and heat of her parents’ *cốm* production floor. When I asked her if those women were truly fighting or just jesting, Hoa gave a surprising answer: “They fight even more now because the farmers don’t bring back as many rice paddies anymore!”

Later in the week, Dung’s grandmother, who I had seen gathering straws in Thiên’s alleyway the previous morning, insisted that the women were mostly horsing around, “*cho vui thôi*—it was just for fun!” While I had spent much of that Fall searching for an answer to my questions about what happened in the alleyway that morning, I later realized that these concerns would soon be inconsequential, as the tradition of “fighting to gather straws” is quickly fading. In the Fall of 2018, Thiên decided not to harvest from Mễ Trì’s rice fields, but to focus instead on bringing in grains from the outside rural districts. He had fallen ill from Dengue Fever in the Winter and, with his weak and aging body, he no longer found self-harvesting to be worthwhile. That Fall, his alleyway was empty and completely quiet, except for the constant baritone beat of the electric mortar and pestle pounding *cốm* in his front yard. Having no reason to visit Thiên’s front yard, the

neighbors stayed inside, behind the locked metal gates of their respective homes. There would be no morning-time entertainment in the alleyway to come out and watch that Fall. The neighbor women no longer had rice straws to fight over.

Cóm, once a trade to supplement seasonal agriculture, has now become Mễ Trì's honorific title—the source of its social distinction in the capital city. Nevertheless, this honor came as a result of agricultural land transformation and its corresponding implications for the village economy, society and culture. Villagers suggested that, in the past, 90-100% of Mễ Trì households produced *cóm* as a supplementary livelihood, but now, only a total of 84 households produce in both hamlets of Mễ Trì. The leader of the Cóm Craft Association in Mễ Trì Hạ hamlet, Mr. Hùng To explained to me that the sensorial atmosphere of *cóm* production has changed considerably since they lost their paddy fields, both as a result of changing production practices as well as the declining number of *cóm* producing households. Nowadays, Mr. Hùng To said that grain outsourcing from distant paddy fields to fulfill the rising input requirements of *cóm* production has gradually stamped out the familiar smells, sights and sounds that once filled the alleyways during the Fall season:

...when it was the season for rice to flower, it smelled very good in Mễ Trì. It was not only fragrant, but in the old days, people would harvest entirely by hand in the field. [When] they brought it home, all of the village streets and alleys would be covered with drying rice straws. [The women] would always dry them in the village. On the village streets, in the afternoon sun, older women would dry the straws to make the brooms. The straws make the entire place smell like sticky rice. But now, this is entirely gone. It is no longer there because no one brings in the rice crops all the way from Bắc Ninh (province).

Mr. Hùng To's regrets foreshadow Mễ Trì's imminent future in which the sensorial elements of producing *cóm* are completely lost to mechanization and outsourcing. But in its current state, the village still has some space for rice straws, in the cramped alleyways between village homes and on the urban sidewalks on the village perimeter. Yet, with each season, *cóm* producers

progressively reduce their orders of whole rice from the surrounding rice growing village, alternatively opting for sacks full of already threshed and washed young rice grains as the distances of transporting such inputs grow longer. They now call on fewer neighbors and relatives to help with the preparation of *cóm*, having incorporated new machines to process *cóm*.

Yet, while the alleyways no longer contain the same ambience of previous years, *cóm* production season continues to fill the village with fragrant smells and a bustling and vibrant entrepreneurial energy that emanates from the cramped 40 square meter *cóm* production areas out into the surrounding homes and streets. Mễ Trì villagers, young and old, take pride in the village's successful handicraft economy and are eager to participate in selling and promoting Mễ Trì's *cóm* to their friends and colleagues in the inner-city. The waning of previous village traditions signals the emergence of new production practices, spaces, and social relations that have together elevated the productivity and value of Mễ Trì's *cóm*. These changes have enabled Mễ Trì's *cóm* to become celebrated as a symbol of the village and, simultaneously, a symbol of Fall in Hanoi. Consequently, as this dissertation will detail progressively in these next chapters, Mễ Trì's *cóm* has given the villagers a greater sense of belonging and purpose amidst a shifting landscape and economy that no longer appears favorable to their former ways of life.

Drawing from the villagers' own narratives about the craft's development and its recent successes, this present chapter describes the history and recent development of *cóm*, tracing its distinctive process of industrialization in the period since producers began losing agricultural land to urban development. It examines the transformation of this once supplementary craft into a post-agrarian industry and in doing so, it addresses a set of question regarding the craft's distinctive character and meaning to village *cóm* producers: firstly, 1) what kind of economic practice is *cóm* production in the present context? And, secondly, 2) what is the relation of contemporary *cóm*

production in Mễ Trì and commonly held notions, of “the rural”/ “the urban”, the “agrarian” / the “industrial,” used for organizing space and forms of livelihood? As this chapter will show, Mễ Trì’s *cóm* producers have adapted to monumental land use changes by creatively rearranging and exploiting the available land and labor sources that exist within the structures of Hanoi’s urban-oriented economy and landscape. In the process of such adaptation, they have also radically transformed craft production. Mễ Trì’s *cóm* production now involves the mechanization of production practices; the re-arrangement of production land and space; and shifting relations of mutual trust and support--among rice growers, producers, retailers, and consumers. These changes have integrated the small village economy into the urban market; at the same time, it has also led to an emerging stratification between rice cultivators and agricultural craft producers, despite the fact that the cultivators have greater access to land.

Contemporary *cóm* production in Mễ Trì represents a household enterprise, supported by both industrial procedures and labor relations, but also, agricultural skills, household collaborations and village alliances. Given that *cóm* production takes place in the domestic sphere and is dependent on kinship relations, Mễ Trì’s craft practices appear to represent a transient economic form that some scholars call the “non-farm household enterprise” (Oostendorp et al. 2009; Vijverberg and Haughton 2002). Ostensibly, this theoretical concept regards *cóm* production as a household-based “proto-industry” that sets the foundation for the full-scale industrialization of rural (peasant) economies (Krietke et al. 1981; Goody 1982). Nevertheless, as this chapter will explain, *cóm* production in Mễ Trì remains constrained by a number of material factors that limit its possibility to expand into a large-scale craft industry without substantial support from municipal policymakers. Given that urban developments are continuing to stretch further into the regions where *cóm* producers are sourcing the rice inputs for making *cóm*, Mễ Trì’s prospects of even

sustaining their craft industry are precariously tied to the urban master plans of Hanoi and the neighboring provinces. Unsurprisingly, Mễ Trì's *cốm* producers are ambivalent about the prospect of *cốm* becoming an urban industry: they recognize that the continued success of their craft depends on the greater industrialization of production processes, but only if they also sustain both material access and symbolic ties to agriculture. In short, Mễ Trì's *cốm* producers will eventually need to regain access to agricultural land.

2.2 From farm craft to machine craft

Before villagers in Mễ Trì began losing their land to urban development in the 1990s, *cốm* was produced through entirely non-mechanized methods (handicraft, or *thủ công*)²⁰. Villagers produced *cốm* in addition to growing rice, during the off-season while waiting for the ordinary rice crops (*lúa tẻ*) to mature. In this interim period, young green sticky rice crops (*lúa nếp non*), were at the ideal age for harvesting. In September through November, farmers rose before dawn to harvest young sticky rice from their paddy fields and from the fields of contiguous villages and carried the loads of rice back to their homes where they would then thresh and wash the grains before putting them onto a large cast-iron wok to roast. In the past, the villagers would stir the roasting grains by hand for several hours, enduring both heat and smoke from the wood fire. After cooling the roasted grains, the villagers used a large wooden mortar and pestle device to pound the grains until they became delicately thin. To operate such device required at least three to four laborers: one to two crouching at the mortar to scoop and stir the rice grains; and one or two at the other end alternating turns to power the pestle with their feet. The villagers sifted the flattened *cốm*

²⁰ “*Thủ công*” is often contrasted with “*với máy móc*,” which means “with machines” and sometimes, “*công nghiệp*” which means industrialized.

through large rattan trays to remove any remaining husks and straw and then poured the grains back into the mortar for further processing.

Cốm production was once a family activity and each household member of the extended family, young and old, had a role to play in the production process. The youngest of the school aged children helped their grandmothers to re-arrange the rice stalks (*nhặt lúa*) in the alleyways, while older children pedaled the pestle with their feet as their mothers and aunts stirred the grains in the attached mortar. Men would harvest and thresh the rice, and women would roast and sieve the grains. In the mornings, women would also trek into the city with baskets full of *cốm* to roam the streets (*đi rong*) of Hanoi's inner district selling their product. During *cốm* production season, the household worked tirelessly throughout the day to produce and sell, at most, 20 kilograms of finished product. "Miserable! Laborious!" (*Khổ! Vất vả!*) the villagers would groan when reflecting on their former, mostly manual, tasks. The old days of making *cốm* entailed more steps and required more labor power from the producers but led to meager results. In villagers' comparisons between current and former production practices, the marker that distinguishes the miserable "old days" (*ngày xưa*) from the new era (*mới đây*) is the time period during which they simultaneously began to lose their farmland and adopt new electricity-powered machines into the production process. New and old is also differentiated by feelings of greater leisure in physical labor and household finances. Thus, villagers' notions of "traditional methods" (*thủ tục truyền thống*) often refer to *cốm* production practices before the mid to late 1990s, rather than to a more distant, historical past.

When I asked Mr. Khoa, a well-regarded *cốm* producer in Mễ Trì Hạ hamlet about how *cốm* production has changed over the past two decades, he pointed out that recent improvements freed labor energy from its previous constrictions:

The process of making *cốm* in the old days was manual. It means that all of the steps of roasting, grinding—all of it was done by hand, not with machines like there are now. Even cutting down the rice crops, threshing the crops, we did that at home (in the village). Nowadays, they do it right on the fields (with machinery). [Now,] we just take home the grains. We [used to] wash the grains, but now they (the rice growers) wash it for us and we just bring the grains home. We bring it home and just make [*cốm*]. We put it in the roaster or out to dry a bit, [but] in the old days, we dried it in the air and then we would put the dried grains out to pound (in the mortar) when it is dry. But now, to reduce labor energy, we just put it into a machine to grind it, take away the shells, and afterwards we pound it so that it becomes *cốm*.

By shifting much of the household's labor energy to other rice growers and to automated machines, *cốm* producers now make *cốm* with more "pleasure" (*suối hơn*) and ease than before. Nevertheless, their ability to produce large volumes of the final product in less time meant that the labor energy that they freed from agriculture and manual tasks was not used for actual leisure or rest, but rather, the energy was reallocated into longer work hours, which raised output levels. In the past, *cốm* could only be produced in the Fall season, between late August and early November, called *vụ mùa*, the main season. However, the new combination of grain outsourcing, mechanization and preservation techniques has enabled the villagers to add an additional production season in the Spring, known as the *vụ chiêm*, or "late season," which stretches from April to May. With the addition of a Spring season, Mễ Trì producers began to conceive of the craft as a primary livelihood rather than a supplementary activity to agriculture.

Table 1

Machine	Approx. year of adoption or invention	Purported cost of machine
Grinding Machine (Máy say sát <i>cốm</i>)	1992	20 million VND / 860 USD
Pounding machine/electric mortar and pestle (Máy giã)	1992	6 million VND/260 USD
Roasting machine (Máy rang <i>cốm</i>)	1993-1994	6 million VND/ 260 USD
Sifting/winnowing machine (Máy sàng <i>cốm</i>)	2013	13-15 million VND/ 560-600 USD

Vacuums	2013	1.5 million VND/ 65 USD (small) and 10-15 million VND/430-600 USD (large)
Refrigerators	2013	unknown

In the early 1990s, a group of villagers drew from existing technologies in rice processing and other crafts (such as noodle production) to design and adopt machines that would replace their labor-powered devices with electrical models [Table 1]. The introduction of electricity-powered roasters, grinders, and mortar and pestle instruments significantly reduced the labor required for producing *côm*. Production teams now usually consist of two main laborers to process the *côm* (which entails the steps of harvesting, grinding, roasting, pounding, and sifting the grains), with potentially one or two additional hands to weigh and package the final product (in most cases, grandparents or children returning home from school). Producers borrowed and adapted some of these machines from well-known automated tools that farmers use for processing ordinary rice grains, such as the rotating grinder that grinds and removes the rice husks in large batches at a time, and the electric mortar and pestle, which Phú Đô village noodle makers purportedly also use to pound rice into flour for making noodles. But Mễ Trì's most prized machine, the rotating clay roaster, was entirely developed in the village itself. It is an electricity-powered roaster that evenly stirs large batches of grains as they roast on top of a wood fired stove.²¹ In explaining to me the history of the machines, Mr. Hùng To proudly told me, "there was no designer, no engineer that

²¹ The actual inventor of this machine, and the households that first adopted machinery, is difficult to determine from fieldwork. Numerous villagers interviewed claimed that they, or their family members, were the first to invent and adopt such tools. This is also true of the expanded grain sources. Perhaps the central takeaway from such information is that techniques for improving *côm* production were shared communally within the village, between neighbors and relative, without fear of competition on the market. Mễ Trì Ha *côm* producer, Khoa told me that, "If you go into Mễ Trì, our village is full of brothers and sisters in the craft village who tell each other that we should make this machine or not make it with this other machine."

made for us a machine. But it was just based on our experiences and our research to come up with them.”

In the past five years, the addition of an electric sifter, large freezers, and vacuums further decreased the *cóm* processing time while also enabling producers to preserve the fragile product for longer periods. Thus, even while producers only make *cóm* for a total of seven months in the year, they continue to sell their reserves of *cóm* from the freezer for the remaining months to maintain a steady source of income. Households invest in the machines by their own means, sometimes using money they received as compensation from developers, for transferring their paddy fields, and other times, they may need to seek loans from other sources, such as banks or other family members. The village's high-volume producers, such as Hoa's parents, Thiên, Mr. Hùng To and Mr. Khoa, have two roasters and up to four large freezers; meanwhile, small-scale producers have may only one roaster, and at most, two freezers. These latter producers are thus unable to have large reserves of *cóm* for selling throughout the year but may supplement this gap in income with other activities.

Older villagers, such as Dung's mother, often recounted that, even while former manual practices were onerous, the process of making *cóm* in the old way incited a lively social atmosphere. These days, the vibrant human chatter that comes along with *cóm* production has been replaced by the mundane hum of machines.

Emily: Do you feel that making *cóm* in the past was harder?

Dung's mother: It was harder than now.

Emily: But was it more fun?

Dung's mother: It was much more fun. In the past, as an agricultural/rural household (*nhà nông*), we pounded *cóm* by foot, we pounded *cóm* while teasing each other, and chatting very loudly. Now, when working with machines, it does not require many people to operate. Making it by machine is simpler and easier.

Like Mr. Hùng To, Dung's parents and other villagers who had produced manually, with their families, for most of their adult lives, sometimes lamented about the sociocultural tradeoffs of introducing machinery. Nevertheless, most villagers, even the nostalgic ones, insist that the benefits of mechanization for Mễ Trì's reputation as *cốm* producers outweighed the costs of losing previous village social customs.

Overall, Mễ Trì's labor-saving machines and preservation methods have allowed Mễ Trì's *cốm* producers to raise their daily production levels from 10-20 kgs to 50-60kgs, even up to 120kgs for high-volume producers. Bác Tùng explained that, nowadays, the productivity of one person has multiplied to a large degree: "In the past, an entire family would make 5 kgs of *cốm*, nowadays, in 1 day, 1 person can make 100 kg of *cốm* in 1 day—as much as 20 people!" As a result of such productivity, most *cốm* production workshops have reduced the number of household laborers to a husband and wife team, typically between the ages of 40-60. Younger children of *cốm* producing families no longer need to contribute to rice cultivation, or in the pounding and sieving of *cốm*, and only occasionally help to pack and sell the *cốm* after work and school, or on the weekends. Mễ Trì elders, on the other hand, help in caretaking of young children while parents are busy on the *cốm* production floor. For Mễ Trì, to reach this kind of labor efficiency and such high production levels, the producers not only needed the machines, but they also had to overcome their limitations in grain inputs, particularly since land recovery was already beginning to occur for road building in the mid 1990s.

2.3 Outsourced grains

Many *cốm* producers recalled that their parents began to outsource grains from surrounding

villagers as early as the 1980s to augment the grains sources from their own fields. Villagers noted that most people were unable to afford to buy motorcycles until sometime in the 2000s, thus their limited mobility also constrained the scale of *cốm* production. In the old days, they sourced grains from places that were easy to access by foot or bicycle through the bumpy dirt roads of their still rural landscape. For example, Mr. Khoa, who is now in his forties, recalled visiting nearby villages in Hà Tây district with his father and uncles as a teenager in the late 1980s to learn the family's secret techniques for choosing high quality young rice grains and to make acquaintances with the rice growers. "It took a few years to know how to buy rice, since the season back then was very short, only about a month. My uncle always asked me to carry the rice," Khoa explained. In those early years, the three men had walked from the village to acquire the inputs. Drawing on his previous experiences and networks with rice growing villages, these days, Mr. Khoa has become one of the highest volume producers in the village and considers himself an expert at finding quality rice grains. In the mid 1990s, as transportation networks in and out of the village improved (to the detriment of the village rice growing fields), Mễ Trì *cốm* producers such as Khoa and his family began to search for other suitable young rice providers. Later on, when they were able to use compensation money from losing their land to buy motorbikes, the producers gradually increased the distance they travel to collect grain inputs.

Currently, Mễ Trì outsources grains from rural villages within a radius of approximately 20 kilometers from Mễ Trì. To retrieve the grains, a household member (typically, the men of the family) will drive a motorbike directly to the rice producing village to collect bags of already harvested, separated and packaged young rice.²² Mễ Trì Thượng's Cốm Craft Association leader,

²² According to one producer I talked to in Mễ Trì Hạ, her family pays 100,000 VND (~5 USD) to the rice growers to harvest, thresh and wash the grains each day. This amount is added on top of the price of the grains, which is measured by the kilogram. Yên, the rice grower in Yên Bình notes that, Mễ Trì producers started to ask them to harvest, wash, and thresh the grains around

Bác Tùng, explained that the producers and the villagers keep in close contact throughout the year to coordinate the cultivation, inspection, and harvesting of the young rice grains. His clunky 2006 Nokia cellphone is filled with the numbers of his various rice growers whose exact locations, grain qualities, and times of harvest he can describe just by glancing at their names.

Bác Tùng: The growers will call us to say, “*anh* (brother), the age of the rice is good already, you can come to examine them and harvest them.” It is simple—it is not like how it was in the old days! In the old days we had to go find places that had rice crops for us to buy, but nowadays we don’t have to go find them, they know us already.

By "finding them," Bác Tùng means that in villages where rice growers are already providing young green grains to Mễ Trì, the two parties have established an unspoken and unlimited exchange relationship. The growers continue to grow rice in the exact way that the *cóm* producers have requested and in return, the *cóm* producers will continue to buy their grains each main and late season. It was an unspoken agreement between the producers and their rice growers; no confirmations are necessary. Moreover, these growers are also referring *cóm* producers to relatives and neighbors when their own annual harvests are low, or when the producers simply require more inputs. Some growers provide to multiple different producing households at the same time. Each *cóm* producing household has at least five grain providers from various villages in Hanoi’s periphery, the closest of which are in Hà Tây, 10-15 km east of the village, and the furthest of which are in Bắc Ninh province, 80 km east of the village. The timing of the harvests between each area is staggered from 10 days up to a month, such that the producers will almost always have grains to use throughout the two three-month production seasons. On the few days each season when there are no grains to collect, the producers take the day to rest, leaving the household production floors vacant and silent, except for when retailers stop by to collect *cóm* to sell at the market.

the year 2013.

In the most recent years, Mễ Trì villagers have collaborated with their neighbors and relatives to gather grains by automobile so that they can transport greater amounts and reduce their individual time and energy spent on driving separate motorbikes. When sharing transportation costs between a group of five households, each pays around 200 thousand VND (~10 USD) in rental fees for the automobile rental each day. Even though traveling by automobile is costlier than self-collection on motorbike, car-sharing enables producers to increase the volume of the grains they are able to transport and is thus preferable for larger-scale producers. Typically, Mễ Trì producers will ride with the automobiles out to the fields to collect the bags of young rice directly from the source, but sometimes, they hire the automobile drivers to bring the grains directly to the village archway. Such recent amendments to grain outsourcing entail additional household expenditures; nevertheless, producers are eager to optimize grain transportation methods because it reduces their overall labor time for producing *côm*, while also leading to higher quantities of *côm* outputs.

Côm producers often describe the activity of collecting grains from the surrounding village as one of the more challenging aspects of the contemporary production process. Using outsourced rather than self-cultivated grains in the production of *côm* enables households to expand their yield of *côm*; however, their economic security remains dependent on the vagaries of agricultural production, as well as the pace of urban development. *Côm* producers feel the economic impacts of poor rice growing seasons and erratic weather patterns in the Red River Delta, which have been increasingly precarious as a result of climate change. Moreover, many people have noted that one of the biggest challenges they face as *côm* producers is that when urbanization and industrialization eventually arrive in the current rice growing regions surrounding Hanoi, Mễ Trì producers will need to travel even further distances to retrieve grains. Even though they may be able to offset

such travel distances by hiring automobiles and grain carriers, these transportation services will impose increasingly higher cost-expenses for producers without the added security of guaranteed higher profits. These insecurities correspond with the country's growing processes of rural-to-urban land use change, which have increasingly removed agricultural infrastructures and patterns of production from land and replaced them with industrial and urban projects – a process that Bryceson 1996 refers to as “de-agrarianization” (Bryceson 1996, 99).

While proliferating events of rural-to-urban land use change in Hanoi's outskirts make *cóm* production more difficult for the Mễ Trì producers, the loss of their agricultural land was, in some ways, advantageous for these *cóm* producers. Many scholars writing on “land grabs” and land use change in Southeast Asia, as well as other parts of the world, have written about how landless farmers have become among the most marginalized and disadvantaged strata of society (see for example, Akram Lodhi 2005; Hall et al. 2011; Borras & Franco 2013); nevertheless, the story of Mễ Trì's craft development suggests a different relationship between landlessness and social status. Without land to grow their own rice, *cóm* producers in Mễ Trì have transformed their agrarian histories and experiences into exclusive expert knowledge that enables them to craft for themselves an elevated social position as non-agricultural craft people and business owners. In their dependence on outsourced grains, Mễ Trì *cóm* producers have also become job creators for these rice growing regions surrounding Hanoi. “They really value us,” Mr. Hùng To said about his grain providers, “wherever I go to buy grains, everyone warmly welcomes us because we are the only ones who buy the harvest from these people.”

According to Mễ Trì *cóm* producers, the rice growers who supply them with resources find it beneficial to cultivate young sticky rice grains because the grains are not only easier to cultivate and harvest, but they also bring in higher profits than other rice varieties. While other rice varieties

need to be dried for up to 20 days after being harvested, young rice grains are used immediately, making cultivation less demanding for rural rice growers. Moreover, since *cóm* is harvested early, while the grains are still green (unripe), rice growers are able to use the empty space and extra time to grow other crops.

Bác Tùng: Nowadays, 1 *sào* of regular rice crops will just amount to 1.2 quintals of grains, but with 1 *sào* of young rice crops, it will make around 2 quintals because the grains of young rice do not need to be dried afterwards. Those rice growers really need us; we lean on each other to live and they really need us. They are very poor, so they are very happy to get the 20-30 million VND (per harvest). Nowadays, regular rice will never sell at 20-30 million VND, but that is possible for young rice. You see, *cóm* is expensive, every *sào* of young grains can be sold for 2 million, and one *mẫu*²³ can be sold for 30 million VND. One *mẫu* of young rice crops produces one ton of rice grains after harvesting, and one ton of rice can be sold for 8 million to 10 million VND. The farmers are making a profit of 20 million, so they are very happy. We (*cóm* producers) help people everywhere get rich. People everywhere know that it is good to have ties to Mễ Trì.

Like Bác Tùng, most *cóm* producers feel a sense of philanthropic pride and social achievement as *cóm* producers. Bác Tùng believes that the altruistic collaborations between *cóm* producers and rice growers contributes to the elevated the status of Mễ Trì village— making it a reputable place and attractive place to conduct business. In their roles as producers rather than rice growers, Mễ Trì villagers are able to draw from their already existing knowledge of agriculture in elevating their businesses, while at the same time providing disadvantaged others with a means of income. All the while, they are staying clear of the rice fields and the negative social connotations associated with backwards and uncivilized peasant lifestyles.

Narratives of Mễ Trì *cóm*'s successes highlight the villagers' industrial ingenuity, but they also carefully underscore Mễ Trì's history of growing rice as a set of exclusive managerial skills and inherited artisan knowledge. The villagers' histories of performing agricultural labor represent particular forms of expertise, which *cóm* and Mễ Trì's *cóm* producers use as cultural capital in the

²³ One *mẫu* is equal to 10 *sào*, in other words, it is equal to 3,600 square meters.

market for heritage goods. At the same time, because agricultural labor continues to evoke images of the backwards and uncivilized Vietnamese peasant, *cóm* producers can distinguish themselves from rice growers by characterizing their work as artisan manufacturing and entrepreneurialism—it is work that does not involve the drudgeries of agricultural labor. The producers' identification as business managers, in relation to the rice growers, speaks to the rural-urban social stratifications that have emerged as a result of recent land use transformations (see for example, Harms 2011). Such identities demonstrate that urban development not only dismantles agricultural livelihoods, but urban land use changes also reinforce social differentiations between people based on their labor and position in the market economy. Zhang and Donaldson (2010) observed a similar process occurring in China, in which the introduction of capitalist relations of production have led to increasing “peasant differentiation” according to their access to land and form of agricultural production (e.g., contract, subsistence, commercial, etc.). In the case of Mễ Trì's emerging *cóm* industry, Mễ Trì's lack of agricultural land for growing rice is the basis for the producers' differentiated status relative to other “peasants.” Without land to grow rice but increased access to urban markets, Mễ Trì *cóm* producers have, in a sense, transformed themselves from rice farmers into capitalist employers of agricultural labor.

2.4 Cóm: The Handicraft Trade of Agriculture

Villagers maintain that the shift from self-harvesting and hand-processing into grain outsourcing and mechanization has not eliminated the labor power of Mễ Trì's *cóm* producers. Rather, the changes in production methods have mostly freed their labor from the steps of *cóm* production that are most associated with their former village lifestyles and livelihoods—namely agriculture and rustic manual work. The villagers have reinvested their labor into other tasks,

which are not necessarily more leisurely than before, given that they still require manual labor. Nevertheless, *cốm* production activities do not require producers to crouch over paddy fields or hot cast iron woks full of roasting rice grains. In other words, the work of producing *cốm* resembles manufacturing rather than agriculture. In describing the improvements in their livelihood since *cốm*'s mechanization, *cốm* producers proudly showed me that they no longer have “yellow feet” (*chân vàng*) from toiling in muddy fields, with water up to their knees. As was often emphasized in my interviews with producers, the new production practices, while arising out of a long history of agrarian knowledge and tradition, appear more modern (*hiện đại*) and developed (*phát triển*) and thus more representative of the village's present socio-spatial status as part of the urban core district. *Cốm* producers suggest that the work is still strenuous (*vất vả*) but it is also more “pleasurable” (*suồng sồng*) in certain ways. During the interim two to three months between the seasons, when the producers are only selling *cốm* from their freezers, they can rest at home, take short vacations, and just “play around” (*chơi*), but without the fear of being called indolent by their neighbors or urban onlookers.

On the one hand, the *cốm* producers want to affirm that they too have developed and modernized their craft in parallel with the urban transformation of their village landscape. Yet at the same time, the villagers remained hesitant about appearing too leisured in their labor practices, almost as if to assure to themselves and others that they have not become idle as a result of receiving compensation money from the loss of their lands. They emphasize that *cốm* production remains an onerous undertaking, but producers are able to engage in this kind of work because of their agrarian past. As villagers often reminded me, *cốm* comes from agriculture, which means that, in order to produce *cốm*, one must have not only a background in agriculture, but also an agrarian mentality towards strenuous physical labor.

Bác Tùng: If people ask us what job we do, we say, we are farmers making *cốm* (*nông dân làm cốm*)—that's it, it's simple.

Emily: in your opinion then, is *cốm* an agricultural trade (*nghề nông nghiệp*)?

Bác Tùng: it is an agricultural trade! Making *cốm* is an agricultural trade.

Emily: I thought it was a handicraft trade (*nghề thủ công*).

Bác Tùng: it is a handicraft trade of agriculture (*Nghề thủ công của nông nghiệp*).

In some ways, Bác Tùng's explanation of *cốm* as a handicraft trade of agriculture parallels the villagers' characterization of Mễ Trì as "half-village and half city" (*nửa làng nửa phố*), which was discussed in Chapter One.

As specialists of a handicraft trade that has roots in agriculture, Mễ Trì's *cốm* producers also possess a form of "social edginess" (Harms 2011) that allows them to transcend the limitations of agricultural and industrial labor. It is their unique position between these two forms of labor that gives them an elevated status and distinction from both rice growers and urban wage workers. "Machines only make our job easier. We still primarily rely on the use our labor power," a villager, one of Bác Tùng's *cốm* producing neighbors emphatically affirmed, when I suggested to him that *cốm* production appeared to be easier than how it was in the past. "Now, as there are machines, the process requires fewer people—that's it." Through such statements, *cốm* producers draw on images of agricultural labor—and its toils and miseries—to stress the magnitude of their current labor effort as makers of a craft that is derived from rice. In stressing that *cốm* production requires hard work and diligence, these producers re-affirm the handicraft's symbolic ties to agriculture. These images of strenuous agricultural work allow them to claim a position of status within urban society, relative to others who have become idled by urban development. Their enduring hard work and diligence refutes the widespread public images of Mễ Trì village as place of indolent farmer-

turned-billionaires who have squandered away the compensation money they received from losing agricultural land. Abrami (2002) and Horat (2017) made similar observations regarding agricultural symbolism in their accounts of petty traders who magnify agricultural roots as a means of aligning with socialist legacies of production and virtuous labour, which stand in superior opposition today's economic context of profit-oriented capitalism.

Cốm producers insist that the labor requirements of today's production practices remain demanding [See Annexes 1 and 2²⁴]. Some people eagerly described their labor to me in full detail, in ways that were both boastful and self-pitying, as if to suggest that perhaps no other person, except a Mễ Trì villager with experience in rice growing, would have the mental and physical strength to produce the craft at the same level of persistence and dexterity. Below is a short snippet of a longer excursus provided by Bác Tùng's family friend, Mrs. Loan. Mrs. Loan is a middle-aged Mễ Trì Thượng *cốm* producer who produces high volumes of *cốm* (over 100 kg) with her husband, while her children, aged 25, 18 and 12, sometimes help with menial tasks of packing and selling the *cốm* online.

Mrs. Loan: If you don't endure hard work, then you cannot make [*cốm*]. Firstly, you have to stay up late and wake up early, and there is little resting time [in between]. For example, you wake up at two in the morning (to prepare the stocks for the retailers), and at ten the new rice grains have arrived. We have to prepare all of the stocks by 7 A.M. so that the retailers can go the market by then. After seven, we rest until 10 A.M. and then we are working again from 10 A.M. until 10 P.M.; we have little time to rest. To do this trade, firstly you have to be patient (*kiên nhẫn*), secondly you have to accept hard work (*phải chịu khó*), and thirdly, you have to have good health (*có sức khỏe*). But [still] not everyone can make it. If my kids cannot endure the hard work, then also they also cannot make it. As my husband was saying, in this job, you are more independent than a wage worker (*công nhân*). It is better than being a wage worker, but if you are not persistent, then you cannot make it. If you don't believe me, then one of these days, around 2 A.M., you can

²⁴ In the Annexes of this chapter, I provide "Day in the life" field notes following the work schedules of one producing household and one *cốm* retail salesperson in order to show the general practices and responsibilities that *cốm* production and dissemination entail. These fieldnote-like accounts provide an illustrative snapshot of the rhythms and the sociality of such endeavors, through which readers can make their own judgements about the demands and challenges of Mễ Trì's exulted craft activity.

come to my house and you will see that we have already woken up for work. You cannot say that you can make it easily just because there are machines— it is not simple like that!

Emphasizing similar hardships and challenges as Mrs. Loan, Mễ Trì producers often contended that it takes a person with a very specific set of qualifications and strengths to make *cốm*. According to Mrs. Loan, making *cốm* is not only better than wage-work, but it is also a job that requires that the producer works with complete dedication, persistence, and mental fortitude (points which I will discuss in further detail in the next Chapter).

Cốm production is described as a physically rigorous (*vất vả*) and time-consuming form of labor: each of the steps of this day-long endeavor poses serious demands on the physical body of the producer who must always be moving, whether to and from the paddy fields or between the various machines to ensure the quality of the finished product. What's more, the craft engages the producers' exceptional mental rigor: it requires the producer's dedicated hard work (*chịu khó*) and perseverance through its challenges. The Vietnamese term *chịu khó*, if directly translated in its verb form indicates the subject's "acceptance" (*chịu*) of hardship (*khó*), which therefore points to the mental fortitude of the subject who "works hard." What such accounts such as these suggest is that, contrary to claims made by the media and outsiders about the indolence of the Mễ Trì farmer-turned-billionaires, *cốm* producers insist that they still work harder and more diligently than ever—even without land for growing crops.

2.5 A Non-Farm Household Enterprise, Constrained by Agriculture

Through the mechanization of production methods and the application of social media and other technologies (such as GrabBike and Facebook) for selling the product, *cốm* producers have radically transformed the process of producing and selling *cốm* into something that resembles

industrial and commercial production rather than a supplementary handicraft coming out of agriculture. Nevertheless, modern day *cốm* production remains dependent on agriculture: it is an agricultural craft industry that emerged in the context of Hanoi's shifting land use practices. In many ways, Mễ Trì's craft of producing *cốm* is similar to other craft industries of Vietnam that have become integrated into post-Đổi Mới economy, such as Bát Tràng's ceramics and Đồng Kỵ wood carvings (Fanchette 2007; Sakata 2013); it a non-farm household enterprise driven by a mixture of mechanization processes, household relations of production, as well as inherited skills and knowledge. On the other hand, *cốm* is one of the few crafts that remains so tenaciously tied to agriculture that greater productivity ultimately cannot be achieved through further specialization and division of labor. For the craft economy of *cốm* to continue growing at a steady rate, Mễ Trì *cốm* producers must be able to have land to provide them with rice inputs.

As a non-agricultural economic activity that takes place in the domestic sphere and is also facilitated by kinship relations, Mễ Trì's *cốm* craft practices match the profile of a transient economic form that some refer to as the “non-farm household enterprise” (NFHE) (Oostendorp et al. 2009; Vijverberg and Haughton 2002). This term has been used to describe those kinds of small-scale entrepreneurial activities based in the setting of one's home, which serve as a transitional method of earning money; “an attractive alternative to farming, but less appealing than most wage-paying jobs” (Vijverberg and Haughton 2002). The NFHE emerges mostly in response to changing land use and socioeconomic conditions in which agricultural cultivation can no longer contribute to household subsistence, but individual household members have not yet accessed alternative livelihoods through wage labor— either out of voluntary choice or due to their lack of necessary skills and cultural capital. Scholars evaluating the emergence of NFHEs in Vietnam in the post-Đổi Mới period between 1992 and 2002 have shown that these forms of household employment

played an important role in economic development in the early 1990s, as a means of absorbing an increasingly landless rural labor force, particularly in urban, middle-income areas (see Vijverberg and Haughton 2002). Vijverberg and Haughton (2002) also suggest that, NFHEs are likely more common in urban areas undergoing land use change, where agriculture extension programs are ineffective or nonexistent, and where diverse forms of urban wage employment have not yet pulled people out of the household economy.

Oosterdop et. al (2009) have also found NFHE as increasingly primary and “professional,” rather than supplementary, activities among urban dwelling populations that are no longer as concerned with reducing risks to household subsistence through income diversification. In other words, these studies have shown that, NFHEs in Vietnam signal the improved material wellbeing of those adapting to shifting land use practices. Nevertheless, both sets of scholars argue that NFHEs are transient and short-lived economic practices; they have already started to dwindle in Vietnam with the emergence of better economic opportunities in the urban setting. Such observations suggest that NFHEs, such as *cóm* production in Mễ Trì village are precursors to a more mature form of industrialization:

In poor areas there is often a lack of education, credit, and effective demand for the products of household enterprises. In rich areas there are better alternatives to family business, typically in the form of wage labor. Non-farm household enterprises thus play an important role in the period of transition, when agriculture is declining in importance but before the formal industrial and services sector is large enough to take up all of the slack. (Vijverberg & Haughton 2002)

The NFHE interpretation of Mễ Trì’s *cóm* producing economy speaks to a number of important and longstanding social theories regarding the role of the household in the industrialization of agrarian societies. For example, Marshall Sahlins (2017) drew from Chayanov’s understandings of peasant household economies in his concept of “domestic mode

of production,” which highlighted a pre-capitalist household unit, not as a completely autarkic unit, but one that is driven by use values and thus inherently underproductive—unable to use resources to their full capacities. The historical shift from underproduction to overproduction in the household economy set the foundations for the early development of industrial capitalism. Some social theorists in the 1970s-1980s have described early stages of rural transformation as “proto-industrialization,” during which time, household cottage industries whose productive activities depended on inner-household and family dynamics, produced goods for merchant capitalists to sell on the market (see Kriedte et al. 1981). As anthropologist Esther Goody described it, “Proto-industry was domestic industry. And as such it was closely tied to the inner dynamic of the family under conditions of market and monetary relationships and capitalist organization of trade, putting out and marketing” (Goody 1982, 19). Importantly, proto-industries were those emerging during an era of world market expansion dominated by merchant capital. Theorists of proto-industrialization saw this stage of socio-material transformation as evidence that full-scale industrialization arose from household peasant industries. Moreover, they suggested that such prototypes were necessary precursors to industrial capitalism given that the self-exploitation of rural household workers led to extra profits, forming the basis of investment in large-scale factories and industrial machinery (Ibid, 28).

I draw attention to these latter theories because the concepts of NHFE and proto-industries would ostensibly describe Mễ Trì’s experiences of land and socioeconomic change, from rice production and supplementary trade, to the industrial production of *cốm*. However, neither models serve as appropriate explanatory frameworks for interpreting Mễ Trì’s craft industry, or the craft industries of Vietnam in general, given their obsolete and ahistorical ideas of domestic/household production and rural-urban economic relations. It would be false to assume to that Vietnamese

peasant households were and are ever fully autarkic and subsistence-driven units of production (see Popkin 1979; Kerkvliet 2005), and it is also likely that rural peasant households had ties to merchant capitalism long before the emergence of NFHE-like industries. Yet, when applied as heuristic typologies, the models of NHFE and proto-industries shed light on the important sociocultural nuances that shape the unique character of Mễ Trì's *cốm* production as a particular kind of household-based economic practice. To begin, Mễ Trì's *cốm* craft industry appears to be distinct from many other craft industries in Vietnam in that it faces certain obstinate hindrances to industrial expansion beyond the domestic sphere.

More than two decades after the Đổi Mới economic reforms, there is strong evidence to suggest that an increasing number of Vietnam's craft enterprises are neither proto-industries nor non-farm household enterprises. In villages whose handicraft have reached global markets, such as the ceramics village of Bát Tràng, or the woodcarving village of Đồng Kỵ, households no longer play a dominant role in organizing relations of production; rather, production has become "clustered" through division of work into groups of enterprises (that are sometimes even separated by region) that specialize in different segments of the craft production process (Sakata 2013; Fanchette 2012). In such grouped enterprises, many of the employees are not household members or even local villagers, but increasingly, they are migrant workers who have been trained to specialize in particular tasks.

Yet, while Mễ Trì's *cốm* production has undergone some segmentation, in its outsourcing of agriculture to other regions and in its reliance on *cốm* retailers to distribute *cốm*, the other production tasks remain persistently based in the home setting and on domestic relations. The distinct materiality of *cốm* can explain some of the intransigencies of the *cốm* producing household unit, in that the fragility of these young grains is best handled in small-scale manufacturing, with

only 1-2 machines processing small batches of grains within a small enough space for producers to continuously inspect each segment of the production process. Household production can also be partially explained by local attitudes towards craft inheritance, which place supreme importance on inherited skills and secrets for producing *cóm* that are exclusive to native Mễ Trì villagers. Mễ Trì villagers regard *cóm* production as a “gene,” passed down from ancestors, such that, even those marrying into a Mễ Trì family are unable to become legitimate *cóm* producers.

Bác Tùng: Noodles are imitate-able, but *cóm* is not. You ask why? Because the roasting technique is very difficult; it is very difficult to produce a single grain of *cóm*, this cannot be taught. You can roast grains all you want but you cannot produce *cóm*.

Ngọc, my colleague from the University: Regarding the technique of producing *cóm*... I met a *cóm* producer who is not from Mễ Trì, but married a Mễ Trì woman and moved into this village. He is making *cóm* and is the head of the *cóm* producing household, but he still does not understand the correct technique of making *cóm*.

Bác Tùng: The wife of that family can produce it, not the husband.

Ngọc: So, is it because he didn't inherit the craft, or what then?

Bác Tùng: It is not because of inheritance, it is the gene. Because of this gene, that man cannot make *cóm*, but his wife can roast it and produce *cóm* (correctly).

Because of peoples' understandings about the genetic predisposition for producing *cóm*, in Mễ Trì *cóm* producing households are almost always a husband and wife duo who are both at least third or fourth generation *cóm* producers. Aside from the occasional support of grandparents and children, some *cóm* producers may enlist the help of members outside of the family for menial tasks, such as sifting *cóm* and weighing and wrapping the packages. However, even for tasks such as sifting and wrapping, which require workers to directly handle the *cóm*, producers prefer to find help exclusively from inside the village, suggesting that neighbors would be more knowledgeable about the product. Given that younger generation Mễ Trì villager now seek for wage work outside of the village appropriate with their university education, parents who produce *cóm* increasingly

seek support from the extended family and from neighbors. Household relations production are also shaped by the spatial requirements for *cóm* production, which is typically done in domestic spaces: in the front or back yards of peoples' homes. Because production space overlaps and blends into living space, husband and wife teams are the most effective.

Yet, despite the seemingly rigid position of the household as the central unit of production, many *cóm* producers are eager to expand and industrialize *cóm* production, to transform Mễ Trì's *cóm* into an industry of a similar size and character as that of Bát Tràng or Đồng Kỵ. Mễ Trì's *cóm* is included in municipal level policies for industrializing Vietnam's craft villages, "in accordance with capital's socioeconomic development strategy, along the direction of industrialization and modernization, along the direction of industrialization and modernization" (People's Committee of Hanoi City 2002). Villagers themselves often expressed to me their hopes and interests in moving their production processes outside of the village residential space, as a means to expand their output, and also as a means for reducing noise pollution. Yet, they also noted that there were a number of material and sociopolitical obstacles preventing them from achieving such goals. In the following, Mrs. Loan, who we heard from above, along with her husband, Mr. Huru, explained to me their concerns about developing the village craft.

Mrs. Loan: Of course, we really want to expand, but, at the very basic level, it depends on the government officials. Right now, if the officials do not allocate to us a portion of land, then how would we would—on our own— go out there and [make *cóm* on a new piece of land]? Villagers are very frustrated about this matter, but the officials cannot make a decision about what to do (to help us). We really want the officials to find us a piece of land so that we have a separate area for producing *cóm* as a craft village

Mr. Huru: If they give us the funds, we producers can come together to make an area, like an industrial area, for producing *cóm*. But, they do not pay attention to the needs of the villagers.

Mr. Hùng To, the leader of the *Cóm* Craft Association in Mễ Trì Ha hamlet, a man who

has been ardently advocating on behalf of the producers for municipal funding, indicated that there were bureaucratic impediments to the industrial expansion of *cóm*. Thus, despite Mễ Trì's inclusion in formal policy decisions regarding Hanoi's craft village development, the producers face the uncompromising political and material roadblock of land availability.

Mr. Hùng To: Nowadays, we just need land. We have all appealed for it, but it is useless. We had petitioned for it when we met last year [with the Ward]. There was one courageous man who recommended that we should cut out an area of land out of the Ward's public land for the households to sell and expand (*cóm*). But recently, the electricity company was given all of that public land.

Land availability is already insufficient for expanding *cóm* production facilities, given that the majority of village residential and public areas are now being used for boarding houses. Yet, in addition to their need for more space to make *cóm*, Mễ Trì's *cóm* producers were also concerned about finding agricultural land to provide them with raw materials for the years to come. As a Mễ Trì Thượng *cóm* producer, Chị Lê described to me below, their reliance on fresh grains means that producers and rice growers endure the same risks, even while the former are technically a non-farm enterprise.

Emily: you don't worry that this trade will disappear in the future?

Chị Lê: I do, but I am divided. With the grains that I am currently getting, for example, if the area urbanizes, then we will no longer have them. The economy of grains faces many risks: sometimes, the rice crops appear to be doing well, but after a storm, they will be completely damaged. I am also worried that in the future, they will be like us—they won't be able to cultivate rice anymore, and they won't give us any more grains for us to be able to produce *cóm*.

Many of the regions in which the *cóm* producers are currently sourcing their grains are already designated in urban master plans as upcoming industrial or urban areas. This means that when such projects come into fruition, Mễ Trì *cóm* producers will need to travel even beyond Bắc Ninh, even more than 80 km from the village, to retrieve the input they need to produce the craft. Such

transportation distances add to the producers' labor time, meanwhile, extra costs for third-party delivery services may not be profitable unless the producers can transport large amounts of grains per each shipment. Even then, given the short shelf-life of young rice grains, the producers would need to expend even more labor energy and time to process the grains into *cóm* before they spoil.

As such, the challenge of finding suitable and reasonably accessible agricultural land for sourcing young rice grains stands out as a looming quandary to *cóm*'s industrialization process. Unlike many other craft villages that have transitioned away from the sphere of the nuclear household into clustered village factories, the size of Mễ Trì *cóm* production is restricted by the limited amount of accessible agricultural resources as well as native-born laboring bodies. In summary, while *cóm* producers had successfully transformed themselves from landless farmers into entrepreneurs, Mễ Trì's *cóm* production is still fundamentally dependent on agricultural land—land that cannot be guaranteed within Hanoi's current urban master plans. Thus, while Mễ Trì's *cóm* craft producing households fit the profile of a Non-Farm Household Enterprise, *cóm* production does not appear to be a proto-industrial endeavor that will eventually morph into a full-scale handicraft industry. Rather, it is a household industry whose future will be tied to Hanoi's ongoing and contentious negotiations between agriculture and urbanization.

2.6 Conclusion: A Non-Farm Enterprise Fueled by Agrarian Knowledge and Rigor

In the application that Mễ Trì Ward officials submitted to the Ministry of Culture for Mễ Trì *cóm* to be considered as “national heritage” (*di sản quốc gia*), they describe, in vivid detail, the village's long agricultural history that led to the development of their craft product (Chapter 4 gives more attention to these narratives and their symbolic implications for consumers and policymakers). Through such accounts, the application emphasizes that, *cóm* is “is a food item

(*món ăn*) connected to the lives of farmers in “our country” (*nước ta*)” (People’s Committee of Hanoi, Ministry of Culture and Sport, 2019). As I pointed out above, Mễ Trì farmers insist that even while they no longer cultivate rice, *cốm* is still an agricultural trade because they maintain a mentality of hard work and diligence towards production activities, which they acquired through previous agricultural engagements. Nonetheless, Mễ Trì *cốm* producers’ professed ties to agriculture sometimes appear at odds with their self-image as urban denizens: on the one hand they may contend that, in terms of labor energy and time, they work just as hard as farmers; on the other hand, they still distinguish themselves from actual cultivators in their reduced misery, and increased wealth and leisure.

Mễ Trì *cốm* producer, Anh Huy: Doing agriculture is not profitable. Sometimes, the rats would eat everything. We would have to go out to the field—the fields here were deep—and when we go out there, in an instant, our feet and hands would be dirty and muddy. We sold our backs to the sky and our faces to the land (*bán mặt cho đất bán lưng cho trời*) [to do grow rice] and we still don’t get much out of it.

When reflecting on the less palatable aspects of agriculture, *cốm* producers suggested that, despite their continued ties to agriculture on the basis of grains, they are no longer the kind of farmers who toil in the fields in soiled clothes. Instead, to Mễ Trì *cốm* producers, agriculture does not represent a physical task, but it is an acquired knowledge—a kind of hands-on expertise that contributes to good *cốm* craftsmanship.

Asked to describe his field of work, Mr. Khoa of Mễ Trì Hạ told me, emphatically, “No doubt that *cốm* is agricultural, only farmers can make *cốm*. The traditional craft is agricultural.” However, Mr. Khoa’s only contact with agriculture these days is when he collects rice from the growers, during which time he acts as a product manager rather than cultivator. Mễ Trì *cốm* producers like Mr. Khoa regard their previous experiences with agriculture to be most important for the inspection and choosing of young sticky rice grains. According to them, the quality of Mễ

Tri's *cóm* is high because of their knowledge of how to grow good grains, such that, even when they can no longer grow rice themselves, Mễ Tri producers still know how to choose the proper grains for producing superior *cóm*. Agriculture has transformed from being a kind of physical labor into a form of theoretical knowledge, which Mễ Tri *cóm* craftspeople use to position themselves as artisans rather than tillers in the context of their urbanizing landscape and economy.

In showing me the science of finding good grains, Cô Liên, a reputable *cóm* seller from Mễ Tri Hạ (see Annex 1), placed a raw grain of young rice into my palm and instructed me to squeeze it until a milky and fragrant sap oozed from the shell.

Cô Liên: Not every *cóm* grain is the same! The theory (*lý tuyết*) on how to examine rice crops is important; it depends on the method of finding rice crops. Here—you can just press the grain open and the grain still has the milk inside, so it is good, but the grains that are already tough on the inside, those rice crop are never good; the *cóm* can never be good. Good rice comes from good rice crops. Here, if you press it, it is full of milk. You have to harvest it when the grains are like that to make good *cóm*.

Cô Liên's main point in this demonstration was that grain choice is so critical to the production of quality *cóm* that only those who have expert theoretical knowledge on how to choose grains—that are at the right degree of ripeness—can produce good *cóm*. This is the main reason why *cóm* producers must travel to the rice growing regions to “inspect” the rice crops (*kiểm tra lúa*) before allowing growers to begin with the harvest. Grain outsourcing has thus shifted producers into an important authoritative position in relation to the rice growers. Mễ Tri *cóm* producers no longer engage in the drudgeries of agriculture but they draw from their former experiences as rice growers, as well as their knowledge of cultivating young sticky rice, to act as experts and quality managers. In such roles, these producers train and supervise their grain providers while remaining on the sidelines of agriculture itself—standing on the dry edges of paddy fields, or on the other side of the telephone as they sit at home in their living rooms drinking tea.

Yet in order to produce *cóm*, Mễ Tri's producers need to possess the same mental and

physical qualities, such as endurance, patience, and diligence, as those for growing wet-rice agriculture. Such a discourse on *cóm* producers' ability to work hard (*chịu khổ*) highlights the persistent moral distinction of Mẽ Trì people. It suggests that the unique traits and attitudes that the *cóm* producers gained through their longer history of growing rice allowed these landless farmers to triumph over the urban changes that would otherwise marginalize agrarian production and people. As the villagers noted in their application to the Ministry of Culture for recognizing *cóm* as a national heritage product, "The process of developing the trade of *cóm* is always connected to the industriousness (*cần cù*), care (*tỷ mĩ*), *one dew and two suns* (*một sương hai nắng*) of the farmers." In summary, agriculture continues to play important material and symbolic roles in *cóm* production, providing producers with the raw inputs as well as the skills, knowledge, moral fortitude for the village craft industry's successful development in recent years. Nevertheless, the industry's inextricable material ties to agriculture also foreshadow the *cóm* craft economy's impending roadblocks, because eventually, *cóm*'s continued economic growth will depend on the producers' accessibility to rice growing land.

This chapter has provided a broad overview of the practices and innovations that enabled Mẽ Trì's to transform and industrialize their village craft since losing agricultural land to urbanization in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The next chapter will pause on more biographical accounts from select producers regarding their specific motivations for engaging in *cóm* production. By reflecting on such narratives, this upcoming chapter intends to make sense of the social and cultural factors that shape peoples' decisions to engage in this village craft as a primary form of livelihood.

Images:



Image 6: Thiên carries harvested bundles of green rice from the fields outside of Mỹ Trì.



Image 7: a rice threshing machine used in a rice-growing village that supplies grains to Mỹ Trì.

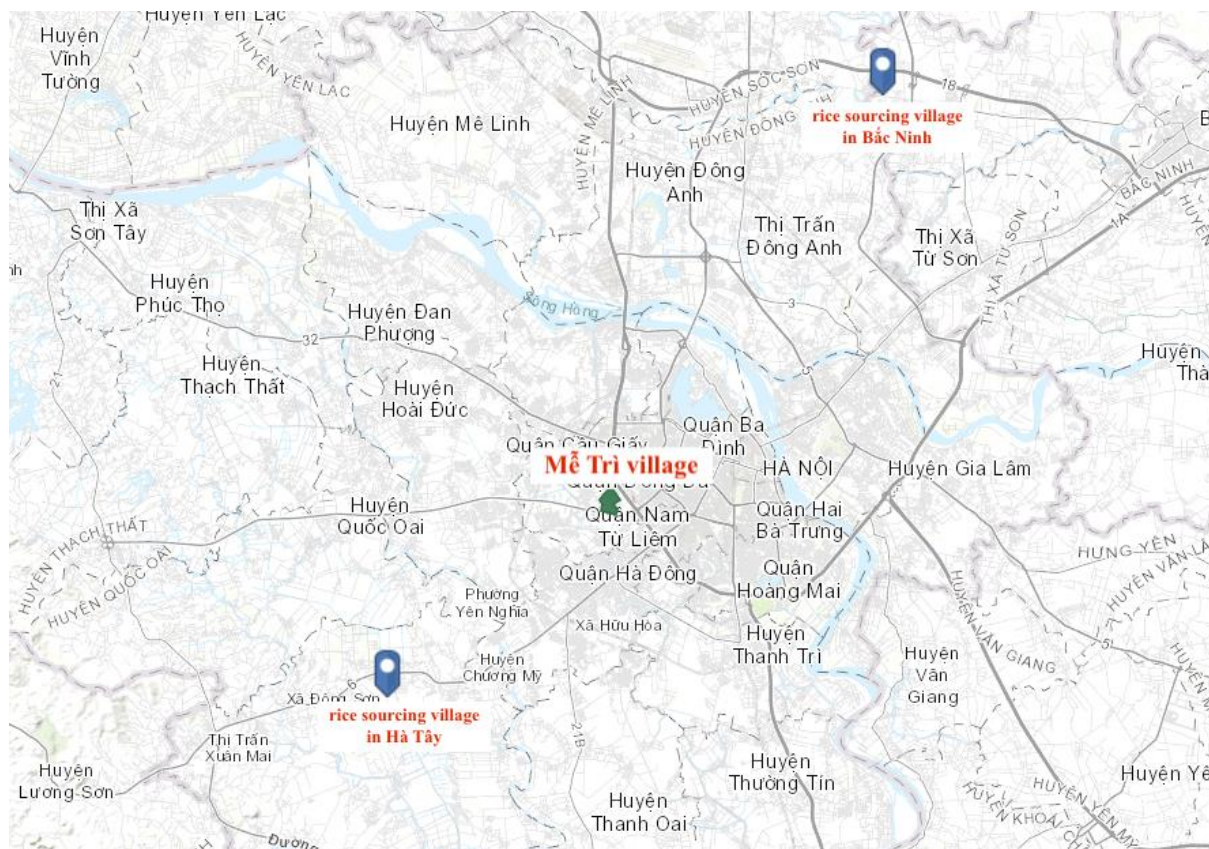


Image 8: Map of Mễ Trì village and regions where rice grains are sourced.

Chapter Three- The Production of Freedom Through Craftmaking

3.1 Introduction:

In Mễ Trì, high volume *cốm* producers may make up to 120 kilograms of *cốm* a day, which they freeze and sell during the off-season, while waiting for new rice crops to mature. Such producers buy large volumes of grains from many growers, which they sometimes ask to be delivered to the front of the village archway, and their seasons can often last weeks longer than other producers. By producing at higher volumes, these *cốm* producing households are able to maintain a stable and comfortable income throughout the year and also enjoy three months of rest between each of the production seasons. Many of those who have found such success in *cốm* production have also been able to purchase extra residential land and homes within the village to top off their *cốm* profits with additional income from renting out rooms to students and migrants. While high volume *cốm* production often entails more than eight hours of continuous processing throughout the day, the producers are at ease (*thoải mái*) in this kind of work; they could often be found taking breaks with friends and neighbors to drink tea and smoke pipe tobacco. Not a single producer refused to spare me time for an interview during their busy workday, even at the height of the production season.

One notable high-volume producer in Mễ Trì Thượng is a man named Thành who—along with his wife—has maintained a successful *cốm* production facility in his front yard since 2000. With nearly two sets of all equipment required to produce com, Thành and his wife specialize in supplying large orders of *cốm* to restaurants and businesses in Hanoi. On the walls of their home, the couple proudly display framed certificates that recognize the quality of their products. “I am simply a normal hardworking person,” Thành said to me about his success in *cốm* production, “but

I am really careful about whatever I do.” The couple’s commitment to the craft has garnered both recognition from the district for their *cốm*, but also important material benefits; Thành and his wife have also been able to use some of the profits from making *cốm* to upgrade their home, invest in boarding houses, and send their children to university. Nevertheless, even with their success as self-made entrepreneurs, *cốm* producers such as Thành are hesitant about accepting an entrepreneurial identity and still hold onto their connections with agriculture in describing their occupation.

Emily: if you meet new people and they ask what your job is, how would you answer them?

Thành: I just say I am doing agriculture, only agriculture—nothing else. I am not a wage worker (*công nhân*), I can’t tell them I am a wage worker.

Emily: Why don’t you tell them you are in the business of making *cốm*?

Thành: But I am doing agriculture (*làm nông nghiệp*) and making *cốm* is a part of agriculture because it is a freelance job (*nghề tự do*). Agriculture is freelancing; I do whatever I want to—on my own.

Yet, despite his claims about doing agriculture (*làm nông nghiệp*), Thành— like the majority of Mỹ Trì villagers at the start of 2018—does not have land to grow rice; ostensibly, he was not engaging in agricultural production in any obvious way. Such enduring self-identifications with agriculture, which arose frequently in my conversations with producers call into question what it really means for *cốm* producer-entrepreneurs like Thành to say that they are “doing agriculture.” These statements show that the relationship between *cốm* and agriculture runs deeper than the craft product’s origins in the rice growing fields of the Red River Delta region. In explaining to an outsider the agricultural and freelancing aspects of their work as *cốm* producers, these Mỹ Trì villagers also revealed how they engage with the dynamics of the market economy as producers of both crafts and capital. Key to Thành’s description of his work is that, as a

“freelance job” (*nghề tự do*), agriculture—which involves *cốm* production—allows him to do what he wants, on his own terms. Like Marx’s conception of man as a “species-being” who makes his “life activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness,” (Marx 1988, 76), *cốm* producers like Thành conceive of their livelihood activities as self-determined and unconstrained by the onerous demands of capitalist production. While he no longer has land to cultivate rice, and while the products he produces will ultimately be connected to capitalism through the market economy, Thành still does agriculture because he remains ownership over his primary means of production: namely, his time and labor.

As this chapter will show, *cốm* producers use the terms “*nông dân*” (farmer) and “*nghề tự do*” (freelancing) interchangeably to describe their craft activities. By relating their economic activities as craft producers to agriculture, producers do not claim that they are still cultivating rice. Instead, in the making of their village craft, villagers tend to emphasize the “free” in “freelancing”; that is, they claim that they are producing freedom (*tự do*) because, contrary to wage work in the urban market economy, those engaged in household *cốm* production and sales have greater control of their time, labor, and laboring bodies. What is important to note here is that the production of *cốm* does not remain external to capitalism, as producers continue to engage with the market (*đi chợ*) to sell *cốm*. Nonetheless, as a craft industry that is still deeply embedded in the rhythms of agricultural cycles, *cốm* production gives Mễ Trì producers the opportunity to use capital for sustaining their social and materials lives on their own terms— without being ensconced within the mandates of capitalist exchange.

The notion of “freedom” which connects *cốm* production to agriculture provides an important insight into the motivations that drive Mễ Trì producers to take up this economic activity as opposed to other employment options in the urban setting. This chapter uses a critical lens to

examine *cóm* producers feelings of freedom by considering the structures within which such freedoms arise. It argues that freedom encapsulates the less tangible, but important, affective, social and cultural factors shaping peoples' motivations to engage in *cóm* production. Producers' decisions to engage in this labor-intensive craft do not spring merely out of material needs, but such actions also respond to certain social and cultural pressures —pressures which have been aggravated by the recent and radical transformation of their land and livelihoods. Narratives from the producers show that *cóm* production is a feasible and advantageous action for those seeking to maintain village social roles and expectations while also integrating into a market economy as entrepreneurs.

3.2 Freedom Work:

The Vietnamese occupational category of “*nghề tự do*” is somewhat comparable to “self-employment,” or “freelancing” in North America and Europe; however, when used in the context of village and household-based forms of production, the concept of “*nghề tự do*” has to do with more than just one's profession. In Vietnamese, “*nghề*” means trade and “*tự do*” means freedom or liberty, and for *cóm* producers, the defining element of their work lies in the second part of this term: the freedom “*tự do*” that they enjoy by engaging in the production of village handicrafts. Mễ Trì *cóm* producers' experiences of freedom in their work have to do with the ways in which they engage with capital relations of production: for them, it is freedom to use the market for reproducing the social and subsistence needs of the household while also being, importantly, *free* from a time-based commodification of their labor. Without referring explicitly to “freedom,” anthropologist Erik Harms has provided similar insights on *nghề tự do* in his analysis of how peri-urban people who live and work in Hóc Môn district of Hồ Chí Minh City oscillate between

“peasant” and capitalist notions of time and space (Harms 2011). In Hóc Môn, Harms observed that free time fuses with work time and that home life is never fully separated from work life; his informants in Hóc Môn exhibited a “temporal orientation to everyday action that prioritized their ability to reproduce themselves as social persons above all else” (Ibid 129). As Harms further explains, “they did not conceive of work primarily in terms of labor calculated in terms of clock time; they conceived of work in terms of what was necessary to reproduce their household and themselves as members of that household” (Ibid 130).

These fluid temporal and spatial orientations to the domestic sphere were central to how Mễ Trì *cốm* producers explained their *nghề tự do* activities. When I asked the mother of Youth Union Secretary Dung, who is a home-based *cốm* retailer, what she does with her day while selling com, she listed: talking with friends, going to visit neighbors in the village, cooking for her family, cleaning up the house, and picking up her grandchildren from school. Yet, as Dung’s mother stressed, “there is no time to play.” She still felt busy throughout the day because these activities were all tasks that were required of her as part of a *nghề tự do*; however, they constituted a kind of work life that was relaxed (*thoải mái*) rather than cumbersome. “A *nghề tự do* is comfortable, it is not regulated,” Dung’s mother explained to me, “If you work as a wage worker, you have to be on time [to work]; that is not comfortable, so [the villagers] do not like it.”

Being employed in a *nghề tự do*, *cốm* producers and retailers are not bound to any rigid time schedules, output goals, and daily work activities. The only time cycles that they follow are agricultural: *cốm* production starts when the young rice are ready to be harvested in October and again in late March. They are able to engage in production and also carry out other domestic tasks, such as childcare, cleaning, and cooking—all while dressed in their flowered pajamas and worn-in t-shirts. They get up early to prepare the *cốm* for retailers, but they can later take quick naps at their

own convenience. In the off-season, Mễ Trì producers can rest and enjoy leisure time with friends without needing to ask for permission from higher-up supervisors. The ability to multi-task and determine one's own work schedule constitute some of the freedoms that make *cốm* production an appealing and comfortable occupation for villagers. "This is a *nghề tự do*. Whenever I want to go [home], I will go," Cô Liên, the *cốm* retailer from 39 Hàng Than explained to me (See Chapter One Annex 1). "If I want to take a break, I will take a break. It is just exclusively on us: if we want to go, then we will go. That is freedom (*tự do*)."

Drawing from Scott's (1976) subsistence ethic and Chayanov's "self-exploitation," (1966), Harms (2011) argues that people in his peri-urban field site used a non-capitalist time-value calculus in determining how much labor they were willing to apply to wage work (128). This argument also applies to the ways in which *cốm* producers justify their own time commitment to the craft; therefore, I will recapture some of the relevant details of Harms' analysis here. Similar to Chayanov's peasant household whose degree of self-exploitation is "determined by a peculiar equilibrium between family demand satisfaction and the drudgery of labor itself" (Chayanov 1966, 6), Harms' peri-urban informants exert themselves in wage work only to the point of reaching a minimum level of subsistence to reproduce their roles as social persons. Once this level is reached, they return to their state of being relaxed (*thoải mái*) (Harms 2011, 133). For the peri-urban people who are the subjects of Harms' ethnography, their minimum subsistence levels include (of course) basic needs such as food, but also just enough extra money to use reproducing the social conditions that they enjoy— such as time for coffee with friends and neighbors.

By prioritizing social relations and household responsibilities in their daily work activities, Mễ Trì producers also use a time value calculus that does not follow a capitalist logic of accumulation. Yet, in Mễ Trì, *cốm* producers neither engage in wage work, nor do they have land

to grow their own crops; instead, they produce *cốm* and sell it on the market for money, which they then use to buy food and other necessary goods. Mễ Trì *cốm* producers, like the peri-urban residents of Hóc Môn, value the versatility of their *nghề tự do*; they work diligently, during which time they can also enjoy the company of neighbors as well as the comforts of a flexible work schedule. The freedom that Mễ Trì *cốm* producers experience results from an ability to exercise ownership over their time and laboring bodies. As Harms points out, “the people who can negotiate these multiple temporal orientations seem able to act upon the world; others seem to be acted on by the world” (Harms 2011, 124). In other words, *cốm* producers have “freedom” in their productive *nghề tự do* activities because, in the production of *cốm*, they retain ownership over their labor as a means of production—their labor is never permanently commodified.

“It is [about] the way in which people are managed” Youth Union Secretary Dung explained, “if [people are] *tự do*, they are not managed by anyone.” *Cốm* producers, such as Mr. Khoa below, confirmed that the main advantage of their household-based form of employment was its freedom from outside management:

Mr. Khoa: I would say that I am doing “*nghề tự do*,” right? Because although I have a job that is not committed to anyone; my family is a *cốm* producing family. If someone on the street asked me [what I do], I would definitely say that *cốm* is my occupation. Nobody manages *cốm* because this is a craft village, and it is small unlike other crafts.

Through statements such as these, producers like Mr. Khoa suggest that since they are a smaller household-based craft industry, they still remain at arms-length from the kinds of labor controls that regulate other industrial workers. Thus, while *cốm* craft economy is unable to industrialize at the same scale as Bát Tràng ceramic village, or Đồng Kỵ wood carving village, Mễ Trì’s encumbrances also bring benefits to the producers in that their labor remains unconstrained by bureaucratic management. Being free from the management of others, *cốm* producers often

suggested that the *cốm* producer is also the “boss” (*chủ*) of his household enterprise (see also, Harms 2013b). By producing the village craft, *cốm* producers were able skirt around certain class-based requirements of wage jobs in the market economy in order to acquire an esteemed social position as business owners and “bosses.”

Bác Tùng: I work in this *cốm* business and I am “the boss” (*chủ*), and being a boss is always better than being a hired laborer. For example, when you go to work out there (*doing wage work*), you must have a high education level. [But] if you have finished 12th grade, gone to college, [and still] you can't find a job, it would be best to stay at home and make *cốm*.

As Bác Tùng points out in his statement above, *cốm* production is superior to wage work because producers are their bosses, but also because success in this industry does not carry the same risks and pre-requisites as other jobs; any native Mỹ Trì villager is able to make *cốm* and can depend on this work to satisfy both their material and social needs.

Whether or not they specifically identified themselves as a “boss,” like Bác Tùng, *cốm* producers typically described *nghề tự do* as the opposite of wage work (*nghề công nhân*). Some people pointed out that, *cốm* production is a *nghề tự do* precisely because it is not wage work. In comparing *cốm* production and *cốm* retailing with wage work, Cô Liên from 39 Hàng Than described the difference in lifestyles between her two daughters-in-law, Mai, who helps sell *cốm* on Hàng Than, and the other, Kim, who works in a government office and receives a fixed monthly salary.

Cô Liên: If we tell [Mai] to go do wage work, she will not go [...] She likes *nghề tự do*, she likes sleeping half the day and she doesn't want to wake up [early] She was afraid to work as a wage worker for that reason. The wife of my second son works [in wage work] (Kim)... Yesterday, she worked for a long time; at 10pm, when we all went to bed already, we still did not see her come home—I don't even know what time she came home last night. It is just her [in the family] that works as a wage worker, for the government. In the future she will have a [good] salary; after 50 years old, she will have an even greater salary.

Emily: But she has little freedom?

Co Lien: Little freedom. It is miserable, she is tied down, she does not get many days off....

Mẽ Trì *cóm* producers' arguments about the miseries and restrictions of wage work appear to correspond with Marx's thoughts on alienated labor under industrial capitalist relations of production. These similarities shed even greater light on the freedom that *cóm* producers experience in their everyday lives while creating a product that has both sentimental and material value in the context of Mẽ Trì.

In Marx's writings, he identifies the alienation of labor in its separation of life-sustaining and life-fulfilling activities; it is a moment in history, during which labor—man's spontaneous activities in the world—becomes merely an act of survival. Labor is no longer a free and conscious action, but a coerced "means of satisfying a need – the need to maintain physical existence" (Marx 1988, 76). Marx argues that the industrial factory has the effect of making labor unnatural to man, while turning primitive subsistence activities into forms of comfort and pleasure:

The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working he does not feel at home. His labor is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labor.

[...]

As a result, therefore, man (the worker) only feels himself freely active in his animal functions – eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and in dressing-up, etc.; and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal. (Marx 1988, 74).

Villagers echo Marx's theory about estranged labor when discussing their anxieties about the constraints of wage work. Some villagers who have already entered the wage economy may find themselves feeling so disoriented and overwhelmed by the act of separating work from their domestic duties that they ultimately return to the village to work as *cóm* producers. Working at home in their pajamas and plastic slippers, Mẽ Trì *cóm* producers make ends meet through activities that they coordinate alongside of their "animal functions"; but more importantly, by

producing the craft of their ancestors, these producers become even more deeply attached to their labor product.

In the case of *cóm* production in Mễ Trì, one key difference that distinguishes this particular economic activity from others—both in the wage economy and the household economy—is that producers never completely alienate themselves from *cóm*, the product of their labor. While Mễ Trì producers ultimately sell *cóm* on the market in exchange for money, *cóm*'s exchange value constitutes only a small part of the products overall value to *cóm* producers. As the majority of producers, such as Mr. Khoa, explained to me—many times over—*cóm* production is also a job that one pursues out of deep affection for the craft:

Emily: Why, after losing your land, did you choose to stay with *cóm* and not pick [another] job that...?

Mr. Khoa: This is a good question. [It is] because I have been making *cóm* (on my own) since 1988; it is in my blood. You can only [make *cóm*] if you love to do it. Whether I lost my rice fields or not, I would still be doing this [because] it is my craft. You must have love for the craft (*yêu nghề*). If I did not have such passion, I would not be able to stay in the business for such long.

As we can surmise from Mr. Khoa's explanation, *cóm* production is an inescapable activity for many villagers, not because they have no other choice, but because they have an ineluctable and sentimental attachment to the craft that they have taken part of since childhood. Thus, while the products of the market economy are often described as estranged labor, or products that “exist outside [man], independently, as something alien to him,” *cóm* is product that contributes to the producer's material as well as social being. It is a product that continues to give producers value and meaning even after it is sold on the market.

Moreover, *cóm* production is an activity that importantly contributes to village social life. Although the alleyways of Mễ Trì are no longer filled with the same cheerful chatter and feathery

green straw as in past *cốm* production seasons, *cốm* continues to bring villagers together. The scent of *cốm* from contiguous homes often prompts neighbors to leave their homes and drop in for a taste of the day's products. And as the women crouch over bamboo mats weighing and tasting the freshly made *cốm*, they are also able to catch up on family news and the latest village gossip. Often times, I learned the most about the villagers during these end-of-the-day sessions, squatting with *cốm* producers and their neighbors next to the metal scales as we weighed and packaged the bags of *cốm*. In Fall 2017, when I marched alongside *cốm* producers on their procession towards the Mỹ Đình sports stadium to attend the district's handicraft celebration and fair, I felt for the first time the intense and contagious enthusiasm of villagers as they waved their banners promoting Mễ Trì's *cốm* products to the drivers passing by our parade; these were sensations that matched, in every respect, the collective effervescence described by Emile Durkheim (Durkheim 2001). Although *cốm* eventually turns into capital when sold on the market, *cốm* production is not experienced as alienated labor because *cốm* is a product that is inextricable from its meaningful attachments with Mễ Trì producers and village context in which it is produced.

3.3 Freedom in Agriculture:

While *cốm* producers are quick to highlight the freedom that they experience in their "*nghề tự do*" work activities, on their official household registration forms, *cốm* producers and retailers declare a more surprising socioeconomic identity. "We are *nông dân* (farmers/peasants) on paper," Mrs. Hà from Mễ Trì Hạ told me "[We are] still doing agriculture." Like Mrs. Hà and her husband, numerous others confirmed that, in their household registration forms, they still declare themselves as "*nông dân*," even though none of these people are cultivating land, the majority of whom do not even have any remaining agricultural land in the village vicinity. When explaining their reasons

for identifying as *nông dân*, many people reiterated that, unlike wage workers, they had freedom (*tự do*) from outside management. Like those occupied in *nghề tự do*, *nông dân* were their own bosses. As Bác Tùng explained to me (below), the category of “*nông dân*” is distinct from any other type of wage employment, even if the work that they do is not actually farming:

Emily: So how about your children?

Bác Tùng: They are also *nông dân*.

Emily: A *nông dân*, but in reality?

Bác Tùng: He is not a government worker so [he is] still a *nông dân*.

Emily: So, your son, what is his main job?

Bác Tùng: A mechanic.

Emily: A mechanic but he is still a *nông dân*?

Bác Tùng: Yeah, he is still farming.

Emily: But he doesn't; you have lost your land.

Bác Tùng: You don't get it. If people don't work for a government organization, they would still say they are *nông dân*.

Emily: Yes, to keep it general...

Bác Tùng: Yes, no government organization, no employer, so [he is] a *nông dân* then.

When I asked people why they declared themselves as *nông dân* rather than as *nghề tự do* on official documents, they pointed out that, the two terms essentially meant the same thing.

Tấn: Isn't agriculture a *nghề tự do*? I'm not a *công nhân* (wage worker) to fill in [my documents] as a *công nhân*.

Tấn's wife: [People who do] *nghề tự do* do agriculture (*làm nông nghiệp*). I do agriculture, so I say that I am doing *nghề tự do*.

Ngọc, my colleague at USSH: The idea is that you are a *nông dân* [because you are]

doing agriculture as a job, [but] *nghề tự do* can [actually be] be driving or something else.

Tấn's wife: No, *nghề tự do* can be many jobs. I am not [working] in a company, so I consider myself as doing *nghề tự do* which means I can do whatever I want, and it is my right to do so. Even if I am not farming anymore, I can be a driver, and that is still a *nghề tự do*—it is not a trade (*as in, it is not wage work*).

What Tấn means here is that making money by driving a taxi is not comparable to working in an office or factory. His main point is that doing agriculture (*làm nông nghiệp*) is a *nghề tự do* and a *nghề tự do* is agriculture because, regardless of whether or not they are actually cultivating land, a *nông dân* is someone who engages in a work activity with no fixed wages or hours. Harms (2011) observed that the peri-urban people in his field site who enjoy extended periods of leisure time between their work activities were never fully employed or unemployed as they “[do] not enter any form of contract that will permanently commodify [their] labor” (Harms 132). In the same vein, Mễ Trì *cốm* producers and retailers participate in market transactions through selling *cốm* but this work does not entail any formal contracts that would subordinate their time and labor to external (capitalist) demands. *Nông dân* have freedom to engage in capitalism on their own terms, which is why it is a *nghề tự do*. *Cốm* production thus is better aligned with the notion of doing “agriculture” in accordance with a peasant economy (Scott 1976) rather than entrepreneurialism because *cốm* producers remain ownership over their time, labor and labor products.

Nonetheless, these parallels do not fully explain why “*nông dân*,” rather than “*nghề tự do*” appears on their registration forms. Some *cốm* producers noted that they specifically declare themselves as *nông dân* because they still have a small piece of land out in Thượng near the Thăng Long highway, even though it is currently being left unused or cultivated by other people (see Chapter Five). For example, Mrs. Loan, who we heard from in the last chapter, explained to me that she still considers herself as a *nông dân* who does a *nghề tự do* as a supplemental trade because

she has a small 1 *sào* (~360 m²) parcel of land that has not yet been transferred to developers.

Mrs. Loan: [Our work] is both farming and doing a *nghề tự do* — both of them [at once] [...] we are a craft village so [our work] is non-agricultural (*phi nông nghiệp*). We don't grow rice, but the trade of making *cốm* is a supplemental trade (*nghề phụ*). Nowadays, it is nearly a main occupation. In the future [when] we lose the rice growing land, then it will become our main trade, [but] because right now, there are still rice fields, *cốm* is still a supplemental trade [...] If we say that [we are doing] both of them are, it is more correct.

Mrs. Loan's perspective highlights the important transitional aspect of peoples' livelihoods, as expressed by their mixed declarations on their household registration forms. It suggests that formerly rice-growing villagers are still struggling to make sense of how a formerly supplementary job, a village craft, transformed into their primary source of income.

One *cốm* producer, Đức from Mỹ Trì Thượng, explained to me that his decision to continue registering as *nông dân* was not about the replacement of farming with the village's supplementary trade. Rather, he identifies as “*nông dân*” because it provides him freedom to engage in multiple economic activities at once.

Đức: *Nông dân* do a lot of trades! Firstly, growing flowers and plants is done by *nông dân*. Fruit is grown by *nông dân*. People develop themselves (economically) as *nông dân*; they advance themselves from their piece of farmland, they can do anything they want with it—they can dig a pond and they would still be *nông dân*. *Nông dân* have a lot of trades, even arts and crafts. Whatever they want to do, they can do it, as long as they grow on output on their *sào* of land, to make money for their livelihoods—their life revolves around this output. As long as they produce a yield to sustain yourself, but the government will not give them anything. Of course, the government will support wage workers, but *nông dân* are not supported with anything; they are just provided with that piece of farmland. Whatever you want to do [with that land] to live, that is your business. (*laughs*)

Yet, unlike Mrs. Loan with her 1 *sào* of land by the highway, the irony of Đức's statement is that Đức did not have any land to give him an output to live on. Đức's only ties to agricultural land were through the rice growers in Hà Tây and Bắc Ninh that provide him with young rice to produce *cốm*. One critical point regarding Đức's explanation of his *nông dân* registration status is that,

although *nông dân* are not supported by the government, they can also “do what [they] want” in order to live. What this suggests is that, government officials may not monitor or govern a *nông dân*’s economic activities as they may with wage workers; *nông dân* are expected to create an income on their own devices. Thus, even without farmland left to till, Mễ Trì *cóm* producers, retailers, and others employed in *nghề tự do* may find it beneficial to register themselves as *nông dân* because of the freedom it provides from the sometimes-prying gaze of the state.

At the same time, their decision to identify as *nông dân* on the household registration papers also speaks to a deeper sociocultural issue regarding how Mễ Trì villagers see themselves within society. When explaining to me why his parents, who are *cóm* retailers, still declare themselves as *nông dân* despite losing their farmland almost two decades before, Youth Union Secretary Dung reasoned that, “it is still their social status. Their individual social status today is either *nông nghiệp* (agriculture) or *nông dân* (farmer).” One possible intention for keeping this registration status is because it more accurately represents Mễ Trì peoples’ cultural and historical identity—their longstanding role in society, before urban development began to take place around the village. Moreover, as a registered occupation that continues to give them freedom—from the structures of wage work, and from the close supervision of the state—villagers’ declaration as *nông dân* also appears to be a small act of resistance. By maintaining their status as *nông dân* on official paperwork, *cóm* producers, *cóm* retailers, and others engaged in self-described *nghề tự do* also limit the encroachment of urban change on their roles and responsibilities in the village context. In a sense, the paper declaration is also inadvertently a political declaration that says to the forces of urbanization: you may take Mễ Trì’s land, but you may not take the identity and freedom of Mễ Trì peoples.

3.4 Status and responsibilities:

As a home-based *nghề tự do*, the production of this craft also provides many people with an avenue through which they could respond to the village's changing social conditions. *Cốm* production remains one of the few dependable spaces through which villagers can find solace in the social relations, as well as cultural norms and customs that existed prior to their integration into the urban economy. In producing the village craft, Mễ Trì *cốm* producers are able to reproduce both community ties and roles that were available to them previously—before the loss of their land and the influx of migrant renters, when the majority of villagers were still engaged in agricultural production.

In recent years, many *cốm* producers in Mễ Trì have united to form a Cốm Craft Association, bringing together producers to work in collaboration with officials at the ward, district, and city-level institutions for transforming *cốm* into an official intangible heritage product of Hanoi (see more on this in Chapter 4). Households that pledge to become members of the Cốm Craft Association pay a small fee in order to use the village's newly acquired, state-supported brand—the craft village's official logo and certificates—to promote their *cốm*. At the same time, households that are members of the *cốm* association also pledge to refrain from using any coloring or chemical additives to alter *cốm*; they are required to pass routine inspections from the health department of Hanoi. The Cốm Craft Association formed only recently out of peoples' growing need for collaboration; many producers noted that there was no need for an official association in the past because everyone was already supporting each other. In principle, the Cốm Craft Association now exists for the purpose of knowledge exchange and mutual efforts to refine the craft. Once every two months, household representatives attend meetings with other association members to discuss topics such as grain sources, new machinery, and potential markets for selling

cóm.

Yet, membership in the Cóm Craft Association also entails other obligations and benefits that do not necessarily pertain to craft production at all. These obligations and benefits, which are purely social, are more likely to persuade *cóm* producers to join the association than the membership access to state-sponsored logos and certificates. When I asked producers in Mễ Trì Hạ and Mễ Trì Thượng about their membership in the association, my respondents mainly reflected on their participation in the association's events and social gatherings. Association members often work together to contribute trays of *cóm* and fruit for local festivals and fairs; they also collaborate in sending joint gifts to other members during important events such as weddings, engagements, and funerals. Households members of the *cóm* craft association also have access to a communal fund to use for "family matters," such as unexpected medical expenses. Some villagers mentioned that, aside from the association's insurance provisions, their membership in the association also brings them greater moral support during difficult times. As one producer told me, on the topic of family issues, "if someone's mother or father, or if there is a grandpa or grandma who has a problem, then you just telephone, everything you just report it to Mr. Tùng, [the leader of the Cóm Craft Association]." The social benefits of association membership implicitly reveal an important factor driving many people to pursue this economy activity: the enduring community that craft production can foster among those who produce com. This community is becoming increasingly important older village members who are accustomed to the kinds of village sociality that existed in the past, when neighboring homes were not always locked up with metal gates and when village alleyways were not full of the unfamiliar faces of migrant renters.

For 65-year-old Bác Tùng, the gregarious Mễ Trì Thượng Head of the Cóm Craft Association, being a *cóm* producer and member of the Cóm Craft Association also allows him to

attain an esteemed role within village politics. In his role as an association leader, Bác Tùng is an “expert” and quasi-political representative of the hamlet’s *cốm* producers; he simultaneously manages local producers and works with Mễ Trì Ward officials at the People’s Committee office to develop the craft as a “brand” and heritage of Hanoi. Although he does not hold an official civil servant position, he is frequently present at planning meetings and events held at the headquarters of the People’s Committee of Ward to discuss the city’s new policies and programs on *cốm* production. Following these meetings, Bác Tùng and Mr. Hùng To, his counterpart in Mễ Trì Hạ, mobilize *cốm* producers to participate in district and city-sponsored craft fairs. His leadership role in *cốm* production therefore enables Bác Tùng to not only unite with other villagers through mutual interests, but to also speak on their behalf to their higher echelons of the local government. His role in the *Cốm* Craft Association provides him with an enduring sense of purpose and authority, even in an urban setting that is otherwise hostile to his village sensibilities and practices. At the same time, he is able to engage in the political and economic activities while evading the same bureaucratic processes that manage the time and labor of official civil servants working in the office setting.

While younger *cốm* producers in Mễ Trì may not participate in the *Cốm* Craft Association as actively as their parents or grandparents, their motivation to produce *cốm* is similarly shaped by a desire to reconcile the village’s changed economic conditions with entrenched social norms. As I discussed in Chapter One, Mễ Trì villagers of the younger generation (~18 to 30 years old) often confessed feeling caught between different spatial and temporal forms. The village, as they have described it, is half village, half city (*nửa làng nửa phố*): not completely traditional (*truyền thống*); but not completely modern either (*hiện đại*).²⁵ As a complex mixture of both temporalities and

²⁵ The experience of these oscillations between rural-urban and traditional-modern spatial-temporal categories is the subject of Harms’ ethnography in *Saigon’s Edge* (Harms 2011).

spaces, young villagers, such 29-year-old Nhr, who we hear from below, often felt equivocal and divergent pressures regarding their proper roles in the family as well as in the larger urbanizing society, within which has become increasingly integrated. Given the overall improvement of material conditions in the village, many parents are now able to send their children to university; moreover, parents increasingly aspire for the next generation of villagers to pursue less physically demanding types of work, even while it means that their children may need to abide by the less flexible work schedule of wage labor. However, parents often challenge their own aspirations by retaining certain expectations about their children's roles and responsibilities in the household.

“[When women are] just 22 years old, [our parents] already tell us to find partners and get married, or else we would be [considered] old maid (é)” Nhr explained, “Even now, they will [pester] a 25-year-old daughter, if she has not married yet; her parents will scold her, pester her and tell her to get married.” Nhr and her husband were both only 22 years old when they married; a year later, Nhr became pregnant began to feel growing pressure from villagers to leave her job at a Korean company to care for her son. “It is true that [villagers] still retain a feudalism (conservative) mindset in Mễ Trì village, the woman has to stay at home and take care of her child. So, when I went to work, I felt discomfort and pressure. After working for a short time as a teacher, Nhr eventually found the both the work conditions and social pressure to return home intolerable and returned home to produce *cóm* with her parents. As a *cóm* producer, she feels comfort in the craft's familiar working conditions and conveniences, which do not differ from those of her daily domestic life, thereby allowing her to care for her children and draw from other family members for support, while also producing the craft as a means of earning money.

Comparing *cóm* production with her previous office jobs, Nhr reiterated the experience of freedom to be an important element of her decision to produce the craft. “I find it more comfortable

(*thoải mái*) because I have more control over my work,” she told me, “For example, I can cook for my children, or take my children to school, it is much more comfortable.” For Như, being “*thoải mái*” has multiple implications; *thoải mái* is not only about being free from the time and labor constraints of wage labor, but the concept of *thoải mái* also describes her feelings of existential relief. By returning to the village’s traditional craft production, Như’s mind is at ease because she feels greater *control* over her actions. Paradoxically, the increased control and comfort that she feels in being free from capitalist relations of production also places her back into the another set of social structures, within which she is expected to appease the ideas of her family and village society. In her work as a *cốm* producer, Như felt comforted by her ability to fulfill her expected social roles, in village society as a wife and mother, and in the city’s market economy, as a successful entrepreneur. “I have to be comfortable with my mind” Như often insisted. Like many other young *cốm* producers in Mễ Trì who feel pressure to keep up with village social expectations, Như hangs on to *cốm*’s resulting existential benefits as her principal motivations for maintaining and developing the village’s craft economy.

3.5 Unfreedoms:

The stories of Bác Tùng and Như show that, while *cốm* production provides Mễ Trì people with a sense of freedom in their economic activities, peoples’ decisions to pursue *nghề tự do* do not exactly come from a place of free choice. Rather, the pursuit of *cốm* production often results from particular social and material conditions beyond the control of Mễ Trì producers, such as the loss of their land and changing aspirations. Mễ Trì *cốm* producers’ conceptions of freedom, which they experience through their work in home-based craft production and sales, are also founded upon and generative of other unfreedoms. More importantly, these unfreedoms are shaped by Vietnam’s

reformed urban-oriented economy, but also by the enduring sociocultural values that continue to determine moral and social relations in Mễ Trì village.

The ethnographic analysis of freedom is particularly compelling in the context of Vietnam, a country whose neoliberal market orientation continuously competes with the state's restrictions on political freedoms. In the context of loosened restrictions on production and trade in a post-reform economy, scholars of Vietnam have observed the emergence of new freedoms such private property rights (Harms 2016a), entrepreneurialism (Horat 2017), and consumerism (Nguyen-Marshall et. al 2012; Nguyen-vo 2008). These studies have also noted that, while Vietnamese citizens no longer need to deal with state-imposed material scarcities or sanctions on citizen actions, these new market freedoms in Vietnam do not preclude other forms of state control. As Harms (2016a) astutely puts it, “neoliberal economics mingle with illiberal politics and free-market expansion coexists with persistent political unfreedoms” (4). Thu Huong Nguyen-vo (2008), who has compared Vietnamese state interventions on gender and sexuality to Foucault's “governmentality,” suggests that Vietnam has two faces when it comes to freedom: one face celebrates individualism and free choice as framed by the logics of market consumption; and the second face is one in which Vietnam's ruling party retains repressive control over its citizens. Nguyen-vo observes that the two mutually reinforce one another such that “there is little contradiction between the neoliberal global economy and a government that at times appears in its repression and Leninist monopoly political power” (Ibid xxii).

The clearest example of such two-faced freedoms can be seen in the political economy of urban land use change. Scholars and journalists have documented numerous cases in which disagreements around rural land dispossession in Vietnam have resulted in state repression and imprisonment of local activists attempting to thwart the process of urban demolition (see Labbé

2015 and Kerkvliet 2014). Simultaneously, Harms (2016a) has shown in his work on the construction of Thủ Thiêm new urban area in Hồ Chí Minh City that, in the process of urban demolition, eviction and displacement, local residents are also developing a strategy of using land use rights to resist the process of land accumulation. Yet, the irony of such freedom is that the emergence of land use rights, which did not exist in previous eras, is ultimately tied to the commodification of land. Such rights are dependent on the advent of private property, which, when consolidated, both drives and strengthens the process of land accumulation (Harms 2016a, 7). Harms notes that “people living in what is sometimes called the ‘renovation generation’ or the ‘postreform era’ often look less to civic politics than to market-based solutions and commercial innovations as a way to express their sense of urban citizenship” (Ibid, 4). What this suggests is that, in the case of land use change in Vietnam, new understandings of freedom based on private property rights support processes of dispossession and exclusion, but at the same time, the state continues to discipline any opposition to these latter processes.

In Mễ Trì, Vietnam’s two faces of freedom are clearly present in peoples’ responses to the loss and transformation their agricultural land. As I will describe in greater detail in Chapter 5, despite my efforts in finding information about land use conflicts, I never discovered any high-profile or escalated quarrels in Mễ Trì regarding land use change. Mễ Trì villagers described to me their negotiations for higher land use compensation prices, which they perceived of as a form of opposition to the loss of the land. For example, when I asked Youth Union Secretary Dung about his family’s experience of land use change, he noted that in later years of land recovery, people “oppose” the decisions made by private developers and state representatives by asking for higher compensation:

Emily: during that time, your parents agreed right away to receive the compensation money? They accepted that they would lose their land or did they not want to lose their

land?

Dung: In the old days, [for example], with the project of the National Convention Center, then you pretty much had to agree with [the price of land compensation]. Nowadays, there are some projects where people find the land compensation too little and they want more, [so] they ask for a higher price [...] these people are pretty much opposing, they do not want to lose the land.

Tâm, my assistant from USSH: Because it is not a government project.

Dung: It is a private project [so] they want to negotiate over the price.

Emily: But in the old days the villagers accepted [the price]?

Dung: In the old days, the villagers mostly accepted it. Starting in 2007, 2008 and before, people mostly agreed to it. But now, people will [ask] for more.

Harms discovered similar patterns of mathematical “opposition” in Thủ Thiêm, wherein residents who have lost their land to urbanization end up “articulating their demands for justice primarily in terms of a simple calculus of value,” expressed in the price per square meter of land that each is entitled to (Harms 2016a, 202). By negotiating with developers and officials for higher compensation deals, Thủ Thiêm residents and Mễ Trì villagers worked to oppose against the forces of dispossession and urban development through highly structured bureaucratic processes. Nevertheless, villagers may have also acted in this way with full awareness that, any other form of political action would have been harshly penalized by the state.

Narratives such as these suggest that many freedoms, in the context of Vietnam’s socialist-oriented market economy, are rather, constrained kinds of freedom. In applying such insights to the analysis of Mễ Trì villagers’ motivations to produce *cốm* rather than engage in other forms of livelihood production, we may then ask: within the structures of Vietnam’s market reforms, to what extent is a *nghe tự do* really “free”? As I described earlier in this chapter, Mễ Trì villagers engaged in *cốm* production and other types of *nghe tự do* find that their work provides certain

freedoms to self-manage their time, labor, and laboring bodies. However, these self-employed workers are still subjected to the market pressures that shape their production activities and everyday consumption patterns. Given the rising material costs of living in Mễ Trì, many villagers are concerned about their ability to sustain household livelihoods in an urban economy. “I did not want to become [part of] the inner city (*nội thành*), because the inner city is urban (*đô thị*) and you lose a lot of money [there],” Đức from Mễ Trì Thượng explained to me, “If children go to school, you would have to lose money for that [as well]. Everything rises in price; everything is more expensive, even waste management. In the inner city, you lose more money than in the outer city; therefore, [being urban] brings in no benefit— it is the inner city but you do not get anything out of it. [I would] rather just be [part of] the outer city.” Bắc Tùng expressed to me similar sentiments about his ambivalence with Mễ Trì’s transformations. “The more urban, the worse!” he groaned, “the price goes up everywhere, for example, the school fee here was just 100,000 (VND) and now we are an urban area and it has gone up to 1 million per month. Urbanization is a curse!”

Aside from rising living costs, Mễ Trì villagers’ shifting material and cultural aspirations have also changed their consumption patterns. Many families now spend their holidays traveling around the country rather than staying at home; they also desire higher quality motorbikes and smartphones and occasionally treat themselves to nice dinners in restaurants outside of the village. In recent years, university attendance in Mễ Trì has also grown, as parents started to invest in their children’s education. In order to meet both subsistence needs as well as these new desires, *cóm* producers are eager to raise their inputs in order to make higher profits. Yet, given their limited ability to expand their household craft industry (see Chapter 2 for more on this topic), producers are unable to accumulate enough surplus to meet these new demands through *cóm* production alone. However, they did not have plans to increase their household through wage labor. Instead,

most *cóm* producers admitted that eventually, they will need to build boarding houses in order to make an additional income to pay for future expenses. As landlords of boarding houses, *cóm* producers become “bosses” of an additional household enterprise. In the same way that they use profits from making *cóm* to reproduce the household, these producers will use the rent that they receive from leasing boarding rooms to purchase their desired goods and services, without having to give up the comforts and flexibility of their home-based work arrangements.

Villagers noted that, after losing their agricultural land, there were few job opportunities in the urban setting available for people without university degrees. Many real estate companies that now use village land for urban development worked with local authorities in previous years to provide villagers with vocational training programs and low-paying wage jobs such as environmental sanitation or taxi driving. *Cóm* producers noted that they did not find the work and income from these kinds of employment to be suitable for their lifestyles. What’s more, many villagers, such as Tùng who works as civil servant in Mễ Trì’s Cadastral Office, noted that *cóm* production is an attractive form of employment precisely because the income that producers and retailer make from selling *cóm* is much higher than the salary of a regular office worker.

Tùng from Cadastral Office: the office salary is not equal to the income from making *cóm*; for those families making *cóm* at a moderate scale, the income is around 200-300 million VND (per season). For families that expand into wholesale trading, their profits must be approximately 500 million VND (per season), after deducting other costs. My salary as a civil servant is just enough to pay the tuition costs for two children.

Yet, despite stable income that *cóm* producers may receive from their work, villagers still consider *cóm* production to be a job for the unemployed. It is a form of livelihood that many pursue because they have few other attractive alternatives. “Only children who are unemployed will make *cóm*,” Mr. Bảo, a former *cóm* producer in Mễ Trì Hạ told me. “Whoever doesn’t have job will do this

job, whoever has a job won't do it," Youth Union Secretary Dung added.

Yet, as we have seen through the example of Nhu, unemployment is not the primary factor driving young people to return to the village to make *côm*. For Nhu, there were other important moral-social factors that contributed to her decision to produce com, in particular, the pressures from her parents and village society regarding her moral and social responsibilities to the family. In general, many of the younger generation villagers that I spoke to noted that their families have become less strict towards their children's changed aspirations but that parents still retained certain expectations. "My mom said I should be married at 26 or 27; women should be married at 20 to 24, it is pretty rare to get married at 30 or 40," one young male villager, Phuong told me, "My parents are not so strict about that [kind of thing], they just pester me sometimes." Although many young villagers have been able to evade familial pressures regarding their personal lives, they still may still feel pressure coming from the (sometimes intrusive) neighbors who spread rumors about what the things they see other village members doing from behind their locked metal gates. 19-year-old Vũ from Mễ Trì Hạ told me that village people still retained old village habit; they still pried into the lives of their neighbors.

Vũ: Generally, [the villagers'] inquisitiveness is a bit uncomfortable. Sometimes, [news of] our family issues will spread out to the entire village before we can even process them. Some stories are exaggerated, [they go] from 1 into 10, and from 10 to a hundred. This is a disadvantage of [living in] the village.

To add to this social atmosphere, middle-aged and older generations, such as those in the age group of Bác Tùng, still hold high expectations regarding the moral and social character of Mễ Trì youth. These persistent expectations put pressure on young people to conform to certain ideals of good citizenship, while also compelling parents to instruct their children to conform to conservative village norms regarding dress, conduct, and marriage. Elder villagers not only uphold

conservative standards about proper dress code and public conduct, but they are also quick to vocalize their opinions about other peoples' career choices and family life. As Nhu had shared with me, when she continued working in the office after having a child, she was ultimately compelled to return to *cóm* production at home because of the discomfort she felt listening to rumors and judgement from the people around her.

Nhu's decision was shaped by a desire to please her family as well as to address a broader concern about the kind of villager she wanted to be. Mr. Hồng and Mrs. Hà from Mễ Trì Hạ also felt faced a crossroads in determining how they wanted to raise their children, Hoa and Khoa, to become virtuous members of village society. When asked why the couple did not build boarding houses to rent out instead of making *cóm*, Mrs. Hà suggested that she wanted to set a good example for her children, "[firstly], *cóm* gives us an income that is decent, secondly, in order for Hoa and Khoa to see that [making *cóm*] is as onerous as it is; otherwise, I build a boarding room for rent, and just eat and play around—land is gold already!" For Mr. Hồng and Mrs. Hà, *cóm* production is not only an income-making activity, it is also pedagogical tool that enables them to better demonstrate to their children the value of hard work in each dollar they earn. Given that younger generation villagers no longer engage in physically taxing labor to sustain their lives, these lessons stand out as an important means for older generations to pass on the village moral and social values of hard work (*chịu khó*). Even Mễ Trì Hạ's *Cóm* Craft Association Leader, Mr. Hùng To agreed that by continuing to produce *cóm*, village *cóm* producers would strengthen the moral attitudes of future generations, because, "at least, they [would be able to] look at it and see it is job that is very laborious—the work of getting rice paddies."

While this section shows that *cóm* production is shaped by a number of unfreedoms—such as neoliberal market logics, state controls, and village social pressures—I do not mean to suggest

here that Mễ Trì *cốm* producers make *cốm* merely to find relief from unfavorable circumstances. As I pointed out earlier, there are also a number of important affective and social factors that shape peoples' motivations to produce *cốm*. Producers choose to engage in craft production to adapt to the loss of their agricultural land; however, their need to adapt to such changes through *cốm* production does not diminish the importance of their individual and social motivations, or the feelings of freedom and comfort that they receive from producing the craft. Nevertheless, the analysis of “unfreedoms” helps to challenge the point that I had made previously about *cốm* production constituting small acts of resistance to the forces of urban transformation. As Lila Abu-Lughod has reminded us in her reversal of Foucault's oft-quoted phrase, “where there is resistance there is [also]power” (Abu-Lughod 1990, 42); when applied towards the analysis of Mễ Trì *cốm* producers, Abu-Lughod's understanding of resistance shows that the producers' acts of producing *cốm* and their self-identification as *nông dân* are actions that are themselves subjected to other forces and structures of control. In other words, it shows that while their experiences of freedom are valid, their actions are not external to capitalism, nor are do they exist outside of the village context; their freedom to produce *cốm* as a “free, conscious activity” is therefore eternally limited.

3.5 Conclusion:

This chapter has shown that *cốm* production is a practice of adaptation that is shaped, not only by its material benefits to producers, but also by its meaningful social and cultural advantages. The notion of freedom within their self-identification as “*nông dân*” performing a “*nghề tự do*” in economic production helps to explain why Mễ Trì *cốm* producers may be drawn to the craft activity, rather than other forms of economic production, as their primary source of livelihood. By engaging in *cốm* production, producers enact a freedom of self-management, which enables them

to evade the constrictions of wage work on time, labor, and laboring bodies. Moreover, by registering themselves as “*nông dân*” on official household records, *cóm* producers retain certain freedoms from state management over their household enterprise, which primarily enables producers preserve their ownership over the means of production, even while they longer have access to agricultural land. The case of Mễ Trì’s *cóm* production therefore shows that land plays a less prominent role in peoples’ confrontations with capitalism as opposed to other factors such as time and labor.

Cóm production is an adaptive economic practice that responds to particular material and social conditions of a transformed space that many find to be an amalgamate of its previous form and its contemporary (urban) additions: a “half-village- half-city” (*nửa làng- nửa phố*). Under such conditions, *cóm* production has become a space not only for the production of one’s material subsistence, but also for generating meaningful identity, and for developing social relations amidst the otherwise dizzying changes in the village landscape. Mễ Trì’s craft economy provides *cóm* producers and retailers the ability to combine domestic duties with household production as well as the ability to uphold village ideals of moral personhood. Nevertheless, a closer inspection of Mễ Trì peoples shift into craft production following the loss of their rice growing fields shows that, in their decisions to produce com, Mễ Trì *cóm* producers may also find themselves to be subordinated by other social-material forces. Moreover, peoples’ current feelings of freedom do not ensure the long-term sustainability of *cóm* production as a feasible source of income for years to come, given their lack of access to rice growing land. Eventually, producers will need to ask for increased government support and more market integration of their product into the national economy; these kinds of support will ultimately lead to greater outside restrictions on people’s processes and practices of producing com. The next chapter in this dissertation will examine Mễ

Tri's craft maintenance activities by connecting the village's longer ancestral history of growing rice to its present-day status as an official craft village of Hanoi and producer of an intangible national heritage.

Chapter Four- From Rice Ponds to Craft Riches: Rural-urban Identity-Making through Heritage Production

4.1 Introduction:

In mid-October of 2018, Mễ Trì *cốm* producers debuted the craft village's *cốm* “*thương hiệu*” (trademark/brand) at a three-day Hanoi Culinary Culture Festival²⁶ in the historic Reunification Park of Ba Đình District. Festival visitors could find this trademark stamped across the tapestry-like photo collages of the production process, which hung on the wall space behind sales booths where Mễ Trì producers were distributing fresh *cốm* to their new customers [see **Images 9 and 10**]. The trademark is a white circle, within which a pair of open hands, with two rice straws extending from its fingertips, hold up a lotus pod whose seeds resemble the grains of *cốm*. Beneath the hands, the slogan reads, “*Cốm Mễ Trì. Traditional Craft Village*” in green letters that match the color of the logo—the quintessential shade of Mễ Trì's young rice grains. At the opening day of the festival, Mễ Trì Thượng's Cốm Craft Association Leader, Bác Tùng, who had been giving his usual verbose sales pitch to new customers, spotted me admiring the new trademark and came to stand at my side, beneath the glossy posters. “Do you like it?” he asked, beaming proudly. Producers like Bác Tùng were eager to direct the customers to notice the posters and the new print on the plastic packages of *cốm* because these logos were not just a piece of advertisement; they were the result of a project that the *cốm* producers had been eagerly anticipating for the past six years.

Cốm Craft Association Leaders, Bác Tùng and Mr. Hùng To, along with officials from Mễ Trì Ward had worked on this collective village trademark since 2012, when Mễ Trì's *cốm* began

²⁶ The well-attended evening event featured more than 24 display booths serving various culinary treats from the Red River Delta region and served as an opportunity for craftspeople and shop owners from newly incorporated urban villages to expand their customer base in the city centers.

to gain the interest of municipal policymakers. Yet for years, Mễ Trì lacked the resources and industry expertise to prepare a logo and branding strategy that would be suitable to use on the market. The opportunities for trademarking Mễ Trì's *cốm* began to look more promising in the summer of 2017 (approximately the time I arrived in the village), when Hanoi's People's Committee granted Mễ Trì Ward the official title of "traditional craft village of Hanoi," an honor that gave them access to government support and resources for improving the village's logo design. As part of the reward, Hanoi's Ministry of Industry and Trade sent a private marketing expert down to the village to work with producers in creating the village trademark; *cốm* producers and ward leaders later met to jointly decide upon the final design. The resulting design that premiered at the Hanoi Culinary Culture Festival is one that links Mễ Trì's *cốm* to the nation, in which the hands are those of Mễ Trì's agrarian craft producers who are holding up the seed pod of a plant that has long stood for the Vietnamese nation. In other words, it is a branding image that also implicitly demonstrates Mễ Trì's ties and contribution to Vietnamese culture. "It is also the image of hands sifting rice grains on a rattan tray," Tuấn, the Cultural Affairs officer at Mễ Trì People's Committee pointed out to me.

In the homes of Mễ Trì *cốm* producers and in the offices of the ward and district's Peoples Committees, villagers use the notion of trademarks "*thương hiệu*" pervasively, in describing their competitive edge on the market for handicraft goods and in comparing their household's products with others household producers in the village. In its ubiquitous uses, "*thương hiệu*" not only serves to connect *cốm* to Mễ Trì as a place-based product, but it is an integral feature of the villagers' claims about the product's heritage, quality, and taste. It has become a marker of Mễ Trì *cốm*'s distinction that describes, sometimes exclusively, and other times, simultaneously, the characteristics of a product belonging to the individual, household, and village. In its multitude of

expressions and connotations, the recent appearance of Mễ Trì's *thương hiệu* has provided *cốm* producing villagers with the confidence to begin realizing their market potential.

Shortly after the launch of the village's official *thương hiệu*, in March of 2019, Hanoi ministries agreed to grant Mễ Trì's *cốm* with an even more prestigious title, as an intangible national heritage (*di sản phi vật thể*). Nevertheless, despite the dominant presence of *cốm* in the current cultural and economic lives of Mễ Trì villagers, Mễ Trì people have continuously admitted to me and to media that *cốm* did not originate in this village, but in Vòng Village, five kilometers to their east. In explaining their lineal ties to the product that has now become a symbol of their economic and cultural identity, Mễ Trì villagers return to the story of their village's unique rice growing history and the hardworking agrarian ancestors who had once produced Hanoi's preeminent rice grains. According to such a discourse, wet rice agriculture serves as powerful historic and symbolic proof of Mễ Trì's distinction as the traditional *cốm* craft village of Hanoi. What's more, such a history of growing rice is so integral to Mễ Trì's claim to perfecting the craft that it somehow counterbalances the fact that the product had actually originated somewhere else.

This chapter examines the structural, discursive and semantic chain of connections that underlie Mễ Trì's contemporary claim to *cốm* as a product of their collective heritage. Village branding strategies, government reports on Mễ Trì *cốm*, and applications for heritage recognition produced by Mễ Trì ward officials provide a narrative about *cốm*, in which particular nuanced definitions of "origins" and "heritage" convey as much about the product of *cốm* as they do about the people who produce it. My analysis focuses on three main factors that contribute to Mễ Trì's cultural, historical, and moral claims to *cốm* as a symbol of their village's distinction. Firstly, I focus on the language and meaning of agrarian origins in Mễ Trì's discursive heritage identities. Secondly, I will discuss the semiotics of paperwork and trademarks in the identity-making

processes. Lastly, I examine the dynamics of power in village-and-state actions for defining and protecting national heritage and traditions. Through these three dimensions, this chapter shows that *cóm* serves as a platform for village *cóm* producers to fashion a distinctive moral and social identity for themselves as virtuous members of an urban society. The language, semiotics and village-state relations associated with making a trademark solidifies villagers' senses of sharing heritage connections with Hanoi. Such forms of belonging for Mễ Trì villagers depends on the reproduction of their history of rice farming as an "agrarian social imaginary" (Mayes 2013) that serves to validate, to consumers as well as relevant state agencies, the distinctive purity and taste of Mễ Trì's craft.

At the same time, recent branding and recognition strategies for legitimizing Mễ Trì's cultural and historical claims to *cóm* have also led Mễ Trì producers to increasingly narrate a craft-making identity through state-issued documents on heritage and food safety. As such, this chapter suggests that, despite Mễ Trì's continuing claims of autonomy in their household-based industrial production units, top-down initiatives for expanding and promoting the village's craft economy have also brought *cóm* producers into a strict regime of governance by the state and the market, through a process that scholars have deemed "heritagization" (Breidenbach and Nyíri 2007; Smith 2009; Bendix 2009; Salemink 2012; Salemink 2016). In this chapter, I provide the ethnographic material and critical analysis that connects this local case study to a larger theoretical question in this dissertation: what images and structures constitute an urban village identity for formerly agrarian village dwellers whose lives and spaces have been transformed by land use change and urban development? More specifically, what might Mễ Trì's dialectical processes of trademarking and heritage-building between village producers and the state show us about how formerly agrarian villages construct their identities in the context of urbanization?

4.2 Stolen Crafts:

In accordance with customs of ancestor worship in northern Vietnam, craft producers and villages, including the artisans who brought their craft products to sell on the 36 guilds of the Old Quarter, erect altars in the communal houses (*đình*) to commemorate the originators of their village craft, known as the craft godfather, or *ông tổ nghề*. These ancestors are worshipped and honored as one of the village's tutelary gods, *thành hoàng*, and seen as protectors of the living inhabitants. Professor Quang Phạm Long, the Head of the Literature department at Vietnam National University and a former employee at the Ministry of Culture, explained to me that this altar is an important cultural aspect of a craft village, particularly for crafts that have been passed on for over one hundred years, or roughly three generations. He advised me to inspect the communal houses of Mễ Trì's two hamlets to find the altar of the village's craft godfather. When I came back to Mễ Trì after meeting with Professor Long to inquire about this altar, the villagers told me that no such altar existed; there was no craft godfather to worship in Mễ Trì village.

Mễ Trì villagers admit that, they had "borrowed" (*mượn*) or "stolen" (*cướp/ăn cắp*) the craft of making *cốm* from Vòng village more than a hundred years before. Villagers have one popular story about how Mễ Trì acquired Vòng's handicraft; it is a tale that also appeared on Mễ Trì's 2016 application to the municipal government for support as a traditional craft village of Hanoi. According to this version, over a hundred years ago, a woman from Mễ Trì village had married a man from Vòng village, learned the craft of producing *cốm* from her husband's family and subsequently brought the trade back to Mễ Trì. Some villagers have also suggested that, in the past, Mễ Trì villagers had gone to Vòng village to work for Vòng *cốm* producers and transferred this learned craft to their family members. Cô Lien, the *cốm* retailer from 39 Hàng Than, described Mễ Trì's acquisition of the craft as "stealthy learning" (*học lóm*) from Vòng. Her forty-year-old

nephew, who currently produces *cóm*, would be the fourth generation to make it in the family; and in many families, *cóm* production has been passed on for seven generations, or more than 200 years.

However, when telling the story about the creation of *cóm*, out of the paddy fields of Hanoi's western region, villagers indicate a more ambiguous connection between Mễ Trì and *cóm*. This ambiguity enables Mễ Trì villagers to obfuscate their stealthy craft history and to highlight instead the valiant character of the farmers who created *cóm*. According to the application that local officials at Mễ Trì's People's Committee submitted to the state in 2018 for consideration of their *cóm* as a national intangible heritage, *cóm* was invented by farmers who were forced to endure the harsh conditions of growing rice in a flood-prone landscape. While acknowledging Vòng village in this text, the writers also suggest that, since the two villages lie in the same region, along the Tô Lịch River where disastrous floods were common, there is a possibility that *cóm* could have originated in Mễ Trì:

A few hundred years ago, the lives of the villagers were peaceful and the main occupation was cultivation and raising livestock. [Once], when the rice paddies began to curl²⁷, there was huge rainstorm and huge winds, the dykes broke and water poured and flooded all of the fields. There was just an area of paddy fields in the higher areas, the areas where people grew a lot of sticky rice, that was not flooded. Because they were hungry and there was nothing left to eat, the villagers went and cut the rice paddies that were still young and had sap [in them] and they went home to pluck [the rice crops] to get the grains and put them in a pan for roasting, and then they put [the grains] into a mortar for pounding. When they pounded it, the husks from the mortar were very fragrant. The villagers tried it and found it to be soft (*dẻo*) and very good. From a creation that helped them to survive hunger, they created a delicacy that is both unique and rustic (*dân dã*). From then, the villagers had maintained and created, from young rice paddies, the traditional delicacy of *cóm* that we have today. There are also documents that say that there are origins of *cóm* in Mễ Trì. There are resemblances with the people in Vòng, because the two villages lie on the Northern shore of the Tô Lịch river. [Mễ Trì] has fertile alluvial land [and] that is abundant [in grains], but there are many lakes so they often experience flooding that destroys their crops. Because of this, when the rice paddies are ruined, the villagers had to harvest with the mentality that, “a green house is better than the old fields.” In the years when they were

²⁷ The text says, “when the rice paddies ‘*uốn cầu*’” which is when it starts to curl downwards due to condensation, signifying wet weather.

not lucky, they would harvest all the young rice and pile it and it would ferment. So the villagers only had the option of plucking it and roasting it, sifting it so that they could get the rice grains to make *cốm* and that is how they developed this product (Ủy Ban Nhân Dân Mê Trì. 2019).

Vòng villagers also tell a comparable story in their narrative of how *cốm* originated in Vòng village (see Vân 2010). Yet, by evoking ambiguity about the origins of *cốm* based on Vòng and Mê Trì's similar geologies, Mê Trì's use of Vòng's origin story allows the villagers to argue that Mê Trì *cốm*'s is equally qualified to become a national intangible heritage as Vòng's. Hoa's grandfather, Ông Liên also suggested to me that the story about the floods that led to the development of *cốm* better describes the unique landscape of Mê Trì than Vòng because Mê Trì once a place that people in the Red River Delta region referred to as a "hollow," a sunken terrain that would overflow with water during the rainy season of July and August. Such narratives of *cốm*' origins emphasize the fortitude of *cốm*'s originators rather than the circumstances that led to the creation of the product; the stories portray the godfathers of *cốm*, whether they were from Vòng or Mê Trì, as hardy agrarian peoples who triumphed through hunger with ingenuity and diligence, to create something distinctly valuable out of their misery and misfortunes.

When answering to his granddaughter Hoa's question about which village had made *cốm* first, Ông Liên replied, "who knows if it was our village or Vòng village, it was just one [shared craft]. Here in the old days, the elders also made *cốm* like in Vòng village. The two villages made it similarly; Vòng village is just closer to the city center." In reality, the proximity difference matters in the distinction between these two villages, because Vòng has continued to hold onto its popular reputation as a *cốm* craft village, thereby adding to Mê Trì's current urgency to distinguish itself through branding tactics and state recognition. One Mê Trì Hạ *cốm* producer told me, "Until now, people only think of Vòng village *cốm*, and Vòng is the real village of *cốm*. But the fact is that Vòng village is now out of land. They buy Mê Trì *cốm* here to sell there." In the present day,

given dwindling agricultural resources for the production of *cốm*, the notions of “original” and “borrowed” crafts have therefore reversed between the two villages.

In the early 1990s, residents in Vòng village, which is a part of Cầu Giấy district, began to lose their agricultural land. Subsequently, new employment opportunities, compensation money and the erosion of paddy fields in the area led to the decline of *cốm* production in Vòng. A few Mễ Trì villagers told me that at the time that urbanization occurred in Vòng, Vòng people went to Mễ Trì to train their previous apprentices on *cốm* production secrets, including tips on how to source the best rice paddies. Many others adamantly claim that Mễ Trì villagers refined production practices themselves and that Vòng producers were later eager to buy and re-sell Mễ Trì's superior *cốm* as their own. Vòng village only has around six households that still produce *cốm* in the village, whereas ninety percent of the *cốm* that Vòng retailers sell comes from Mễ Trì. Bà Hoàng, Hoa's maternal grandmother emphasized that, though the villagers had stolen the trade secrets from Vòng, they also learned it meticulously, "bit-by-bit" (*học mót*). She noted that, making *cốm* is not the traditional craft of Mễ Trì, but that "Vòng's *cốm* wasn't made as carefully (*cẩn thận*) as Mễ Trì. [Mễ Trì] was more creative (*sáng tạo*)."

Emily: although Mễ Trì's villagers are not the first ones to make *cốm*, they are proud of it [right?]. Do you feel proud [of *cốm*]?

Bà Hoàng: I am. I feel proud. Our ancestors picked it up then passed it down to my grandparents, then to my parents, then to me; I passed it onto my children. Only because of the love [we have] for the craft we would learn so hard (to make it). Our ancestors stole it from Vòng; [at least,] people said it was stolen, but we actually picked it up [ourselves].

Hoa: [grandmother] means that we worked for them then we picked it up.

Bà Hoàng: Vòng's *cốm* is delicious but it is not as good as Mễ Trì's.

Mễ Trì villagers are unanimously proud of the superior quality of their craft product, as compared to Vòng's original *cốm*. As Bà Hoàng pointed out, Mễ Trì's care and creativity enabled them to

overcome the material challenges that weakened *cốm* production in Vòng village. According to village narratives and documents, creativity and diligence in developing the craft through significant material challenges make the origins of the craft irrelevant to its current titles. Moreover, villagers reinforce the importance of such character traits in their story of the village's longer history of producing rice.

4.3 Mễ Trì, Hanoi's Royal Rice Pond

Mễ Trì's *cốm* is never mentioned in ancient songs or proverbs about Hanoi's countryside. Instead, old folk sayings make references to Mễ Trì's rice grains—the best grains in the Red River Delta. When asked about Mễ Trì's longer history, villagers often recite an adage that lists the delicacies of this delta region, linking Mễ Trì to rice grains and Vòng village to com: “Vòng's *cốm*, Mễ Trì's perfumed rice, Hoisin sauce of Bần,²⁸ Basil of Láng,²⁹ is there anything more delicious?”³⁰ In the old days, before it's *cốm* rose to prominence to become the symbol of Mễ Trì's collective village identity, the village had been famous in the Red River Delta region for producing a particularly special rice variety called “*gạo tám*,” or perfumed rice. As the village elders explained, Mễ Trì's perfumed rice was distinctive because of the unique characteristics of the alluvial soils and climatic conditions that gave these grains it's unrivaled taste. In the context of Mễ Trì *cốm*'s commodification and celebration in market-oriented urban economy, villagers continue to re-inscribe this history onto their recently acclaimed *cốm* product.

When speaking to outsiders about current successes of his village' *cốm* products, Mễ Trì

²⁸ Bần is a village located in Hưng Yên province that is famous for its “*trương*” or hoisin sauce.

²⁹ Láng is a village located on the Tô Lịch River in Cầu Giấy District of Hanoi, famous for growing basil herbs.

³⁰ *Cốm Vòng, gạo tám Mễ Trì Trương bần, húng Láng² còn gì ngon hơn?*

Thượng's Cốm Craft Association leader Bác Tùng often begins with the story of the village's rice growing history. Mễ Trì is now Hanoi's state-recognized traditional craft village for producing *cốm*, but Bác Tùng insisted that in order to truly understand Mễ Trì—it's people, artifacts, purpose, and longer trajectory of craft development—people must understand the village origins. Bác Tùng argued that the essence of Mễ Trì, as encapsulated by the etymology of its village name, is the production of rice:

You have to imagine it like this: Mễ Trì in the old days was the land of Anh Sơn; it was not yet Mễ Trì. Why did it become Mễ Trì? It was many years before the village began to produce *cốm*. You have to consider it according to the history. [...] In the past, this village was Anh Sơn village, Anh Sơn village had many things to offer the king: the first was wine, the second was *cốm*, and the third was rice. The king found the *cốm* so tasty that he asked, "which village offered that rice?" He had been told that it was Anh Sơn village. Then during the reign of Lê dynasty, this village had to be renamed, meaning that it was not named as Anh Sơn but changed into Mễ Trì. "Mễ" means rice, "Trì" means water, or so they called it a pond.³¹ Mễ Trì is a rice pond, but it was an ancient village called Anh Sơn, not Mễ Trì village. You see, there are many good things here.

Bác Tùng's history lesson underscores both the antiquity of the village in the longer history of the nation, as well as the etymological significance of Mễ Trì's village name in Sino-Vietnamese (*Hán Việt*)—a name that encapsulates the distinction of their agrarian landscapes and the superior rice that such land and its peoples could produce. Perfumed rice contributed to Mễ Trì's elevated status and economic role in Vietnam during the early feudal era. Like Bác Tùng, many of the village elders had reiterated to me many times that, in the year 1004, Emperor Lý Đại Hạnh re-christened the village as "Mễ Trì," meaning "rice pond," and appointed the village as the official grain provider to the Lý royal family. Its distinctive rice grains put Mễ Trì on the map of Hanoi delicacies and in the ancient adages on the Red River Delta such that, even while many Mễ Trì inhabitants have never seen or touched these perfumed grains, the village's former designation as rice pond

³¹ "Mễ" means rice, "Trì" means water in Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary (*Hán Việt*), which refers to the Vietnamese words and morphemes originating from the Chinese language as a result.

remains important to Mễ Trì people in the present day. This historical account of Mễ Trì underscores the village's agricultural distinction, affirming the capability of its agrarian people to produce good grains for making *cốm*. For Mễ Trì villagers, the village's historical role as a royal rice provider is important to its current day craft endeavors because, as one villager aptly put it, "*cốm* is an agricultural craft, it comes from agriculture," (*cốm là nghề nông, từ nông nghiệp*). The history and reputation of Mễ Trì's agriculture suggests that the village was uniquely positioned to supply Hanoi with superior rice because of the tenacious strength of the farmers who overcame region's harsh topography and climate. In such narratives, the village landscape is portrayed as being harsh and difficult to manage, except through the clever and dexterous hands of Mễ Trì people.

In his dissertation on 19th Century Mễ Trì, Kim Jong-Ouk (2009) discovered from historical documents on Mễ Trì that, unlike other agricultural regions along the Red River, Mễ Trì's bumpy terrain and isolation from nearby rivers meant that it did not have the fertile alluvial soil that were favorable to rice cultivation as in other parts of the delta. Punctured everywhere by sinks and ditches, Mễ Trì's highly oxidized, acidic and waterlogged soils provided harsh conditions for growing most regular crops (Ouk 2009, 32). Ouk notes that during much of the 19th Century, only 500 acres of the village's 2,000 acres of paddy land were used for cultivation (Ibid 35). The village's vast agricultural terrain lies between the Tô Lịch and the Nhuệ Rivers; however, Mễ Trì likely did not receive much, if any, irrigation water from these rivers. Rather, village life and agriculture depended heavily on the local lakes and ponds, and most notably the immense lagoon (*đầm*), which today has been re-shaped to become part of the National Convention Center's scenic landscape. Villagers even claim that in the past, their ancestors had built rice terraces around this lagoon. "[They did it] in the style of terrace fields like how the mountainous people did. They

splashed water from the pond up there to water the rice,” Cultural Affairs Officer Tuấn once described to me. According to accounts from village documents and oral histories that I collected from the elders, the nutrient-filled water from the ponds, lakes and lagoons transformed Mễ Trì’s low yielding crops into precious *gạo tám* grains. Moreover, the land produced delicious *nếp cái hoa vàng*, a variety of young sticky rice that villagers would later use to make *cốm*. Thus, despite the village’s jagged topography and inferior soils, the paddy fields became unwittingly and distinctly suitable for producing exquisite rice to meet royal taste standards (Ouk 2009, 32). Hanoi’s “rice pond” did not produce an abundance of rice, but the fragrant quality of its low yields surpassed all other regional grains.

Mễ Trì’s geological misfortune hindered agricultural productivity, but at the same time, it extracted, out of necessity, the creative and industrious labor of Mễ Trì’s farmers, which villagers now attribute to the distinctive characteristic of Mễ Trì people. In their official application for Mễ Trì’s *cốm* to be considered as an “intangible heritage” of Vietnam, local ward officials specifically highlighted Mễ Trì’s unique landscape and the diligent work ethic of its inhabitants as a reason for granting the village this esteemed title:

Mễ Trì people have a tradition of industriousness (*cần cù*) and creativity (*sáng tạo*), which is typical for the regions that grow wet rice, therefore, from a long time ago, a part of the agricultural products of Mễ Trì had already become a commodity good for satisfying the livelihood needs of the capital and exchanged with the other regions [in Hanoi], as the folk saying goes:

Mễ Trì is fragrant with gạo tám xoan
The scent of the most delicious noodles ³²in the region

(Ủy Ban Nhân Dân Mễ Trì 2019, 3)

³² The adage refers to noodles (*bún*) here likely because, in the days of *gạo tám* rice cultivation, Mễ Trì’s rice grains were used to make rice noodles in the contiguous village of Phú Đô, which—to this day—is celebrated for its quality noodles.

Narratives such as these suggest that Mễ Trì's "soft" (*dẻo*) and fragrant (*thơm*) rice was so good that it not only served the king and his court, but that it also facilitated the development of surrounding handicrafts, such as noodle-making in neighboring Phú Đô village, as well as *cốm* production in Vòng village. "In general, this land had the best grains in the old days, there wasn't a single place that had grains as good as Mễ Trì's," Hoa's grandfather, Ông Liên told me, when I asked him about *gạo tám*, "[we had] grains for making noodles; it was good for making noodles. It was soft and delicious. Phú Đô made good noodles, Vòng Village would come here to get grains to make *cốm* and from then on, they had exchange relations [with us]." When describing the village's history of *cốm* production to outsiders and in their formal applications for state support in marketing their products, villagers continue to reproduce the image of ancient Mễ Trì as the dignified rice supplier behind Hanoi's most beloved culinary products. Bác Tùng explained that the most obvious connection between Mễ Trì's previous rice growing activities and its present-day craft production is that "'Mễ' means rice, you have to have rice to make *cốm*; without rice there would be no *cốm*!" Nowadays, Mễ Trì's regal *gạo tám* only exists in ancient folk songs about the village. Although the exact timeline of *gạo tám*'s disappearance is uncertain, the villagers gradually stopped growing this perfumed rice because its low productivity did not make sense during Vietnam's post-war efforts to rebuild the nation. In due course, the village lost the material foundation of its title as Hanoi's rice pond: the land itself.

When villagers eventually lost their rice growing land, Mễ Trì's historical fame as rice producers eventually re-emerged as a symbolic resource that helped transform their supplemental trade, of *cốm* production, into the village's source of national prestige. As my village correspondents clarified, Mễ Trì's perfumed rice exists in folk history while *cốm* is now central to the village's culture and identity. Hùng Nhỏ, the childhood friend of my Youth Union Secretary

Dung, explained these contemporary sociocultural transformations to me by pointing to the importance of land or the production of *gạo tám* as opposed to *cốm*:

Emily: But in the poems and folk sayings that I have read then in there it said *Cốm Vòng* and *gạo tám Mễ Trì*. But then why would you say that *cốm* is a cultural feature (*nét văn hoá*) of Mễ Trì but *gạo tám* does not have as strong a role as *cốm* com?

Hung: Because, simply, *cốm* still exists now and has developed [further]. *Gạo tám* is no longer produced, so it has been lost; it has disappeared. *Cốm*, you can go and buy rice from young rice paddies in a different area and come home to process [it] to make *cốm*. But *gạo tám*, you can go buy in other places, but it is not the *gạo tám* of Mễ Trì anymore...Mễ Trì's *gạo tám* has to be grown on Mễ Trì land, grown and collected on Mễ Trì land. Why does *cốm* still have a reputation that has existed until now, but *gạo tám* has disappeared? It has to be grown here in order to be a specialty.

Hùng argues that land played a significant role in Mễ Trì's former prestige for growing *gạo tám*. At the same time, he reiterates an accepted understanding about the distinction of Mễ Trì's *cốm*, which is that the village's distinctive *cốm* does not come from the particular materiality of the land, it's *terroir* (see for example, Trubek 2008 and Gopnik 2011), but rather, *cốm*'s quality lies in the skilled hands of the people who had previously tilled Hanoi's esteemed rice. When they lost their rice growing land, the strong-willed and assiduously natured inhabitants of Mễ Trì overcame these material challenges to produce a highly acclaimed agrarian product, just as their ancestors did when Mễ Trì became Hanoi's rice pond. Villagers claim that the present-day accomplishments of its *cốm* producers and the high value of its product come from the distinguished traits of its formerly agrarian people. Thus, even while the majority of Mễ Trì's *cốm* producers no longer till the land to reap its treasured rice grains, the producers continue to maintain the image of their village as an abundant agrarian landscape.

4.4 The Scent of Autumn Blows into Hanoi

The link between the craft of making *cốm* and the rice producing village of Mễ Trì shows

that Mễ Trì's claim to *cốm* production as a craft of their heritage did not depend on whether or not *cốm* actually originated in the village. Rather, producers drew heritage connections between *cốm* and Mễ Trì because of the *kind of place* from which their craft product purportedly emerges: a lush agrarian landscape. Mễ Trì's contentions about *cốm*'s agrarian origins builds upon and satisfies the widespread belief held by com's urban consumers which suggests that *cốm* is produced by rice farmers living in the rural peripheries of Hanoi. Although these convictions were once true when *cốm* was an off-season supplementary occupation for rice growers in both Vòng village and Mễ Trì, given the present-day lack of agricultural land in both of these places, Mễ Trì producers needed to strategically craft a narrative about themselves that would maintain com's agrarian roots and the symbolic values that *cốm* consumers associated with the product's rural origins. To *cốm* consumers, the value of *cốm* reflects a "double symbolism" (Harms 2011) of the city and the countryside that, on the one hand, remembers the rural as a place of innocence and pre-modern Vietnamese traditions, but on the other, continues to valorize the city (specifically, the city of Hanoi) as the natural and ultimate beneficiary of Vietnam's beautiful and civilized cultures. Popular narratives about *cốm* indicate that the symbolic value of *cốm* arises in the countryside, but always from the perspective of a wistful urban consumer who idealizes Hanoi's agrarian landscape as a time capsule of youthful beauty and familial comfort.

Popular literature and public narratives about Hanoi often allude to the nutty scent of *cốm* floating with the gentle autumn breeze that blows in from Hanoi's peripheral countryside, signaling the arrival of Fall in the capital. The smell is said be soft, sweet, and subtly milky³³ (*thoang thoảng mùi sữa*), like the fragrance of the creamy sap that oozes from the grains of young rice crops that are ready to be harvested. Accounts of Hanoi's *cốm*-filled autumn also express

³³ The quality of being "milky" (*như sữa*) refers to the milk-like sap that is distinctive of young sticky rice grains, which smell strongly like fields of fresh rice crops.

sentiments of nostalgia for the lightness and warmth of traditions from a simpler rural past. Below, a song verse from “Hanoi Autumn,” written by the exalted Vietnamese modern songwriter, Trình Công Sơn, captures the nostalgic and sensorial memory of autumn’s appearance on the streets of Hanoi:

*Hanoi autumn
Autumn in Hanoi,
The season when milk flowers return
perfuming each breeze.
The season green cốm returns.
Each small handful is fragrant.
Milky cốm on the sidewalks;
perfuming each step [I] walk.³⁴*

The Vietnamese poet, Nguyễn Đình Thi, also reflected on Hanoi’s fragrant autumnal zephyr in his piece, *Đất Nước*, “The Country,” a poem about Vietnam’s gloomy wartime conditions.

*The crisp morning feels like morning from years long ago
[When] winds brought in the autumn scent of fresh cốm.
I remember the autumn days from before
The cold mornings in the heart of Hanoi
The chilly wind in the long and noisy streets.
Those who stroll about do not even turn around
[to see] behind them, a sunny terrace covered in leaves.³⁵*

Writings such as these reminisce on winds that carry the fragrance of *cốm*, as well as the sight of the women who carry in *cốm* (mostly, from Vòng village) on baskets across their shoulders through the streets and sidewalks of Hanoi. In literature and public memory, these women are remembered to be graceful and affable whose appearance and company feel somehow familiar to

³⁴ Trình Công Sơn lyrics for “Nhớ Mùa Thu Hà Nội,” translated by author. First recorded in 1985.

³⁵ Nguyễn Đình Thi poem for “Đất Nước,” translated by author. First published sometime between 1948-1955. Nguyễn Đình Thi. “Đất Nước,” Thi Viện. Accessed October 31, 2019, https://www.thivien.net/Nguy%E1%BB%85n-%C4%90%C3%ACnh-Thi/%C4%90%E1%BA%A5t-n%C6%B0%E1%BB%9Bc/poem-YFWZ8afu7g2IoLevX1_E2Q

those who wait for the vendors to pass their doorways (see Vũ 1999). Many writers describe the women to gait through Hanoi so peacefully and gently that only the smell of *cốm* and the silhouette of their baskets announce their arrival to the city, because unlike other vendors, they do not even call out through the streets to draw out their customers into the streets (Lý 2004, 226). They carry two rattan baskets strung together by a bamboo pole, and atop the baskets, there is a woven tray that is decorated with green rice straws and stacks of lotus leaves from Hồ Tây, or West Lake—the largest lake in Hanoi. *Cốm*-selling ladies wear brown or black silk *áo dài*, the tunics worn by Vietnamese women since the Nguyễn era, or else long skirts and white halter shirts (*áo yếm*) to reflect the traditional dress of rural women in the Northern region. In his essay “Tastes of the Capital,” Professor of Vietnamese folk culture, Vũ Ngọc Khánh fondly remembers the intimate familiarity of his interactions with the *cốm* vendors that came through his neighborhood in Hanoi, “each time West Lake ripples with the yellow glare of autumn” (Vũ 1999, 215):

The graceful shape of these women, with smiles that always appear on their oval faces; they greet us very gently and courteously. It is as if the fragrance of *cốm* would blow away if they speak too loudly. They only need to go past my door, not even into my home, but the smell of the lotus leaf has already made me feel something familiar and intimate. “These packages of *cốm* are already gone, but I have saved one for you,” the saleswoman tells me, she calls me uncle, “*cậu*,” in the way we addressed each other in the old days. It is likely the way all the saleswomen speak to win our hearts, but I do not know why I find it so endearing, soft, and fragrant, like the taste of *cốm*. I remember the name of a woman, Cô Lê from Vòng Hau hamlet, who I called “*chị*” (sister) because I ate her *cốm* so regularly. *Chị Lê*! Where are you now? Do you still sell Vòng *cốm* anymore?” (Ibid 56)

Delicate beauty and grace are not only the features of the women who sell *cốm*, but they are also characteristic of the thin rice grain itself. *Cốm* is a food that carries an innocent and gentle femininity that belies the rustic and protracted agrarian labor that it endures. Hoa’s grandfather, Ong Liên told me that villagers often used “*cốm*” to describe the youthful nature of women in their village:

Ong Liên: ...with “*cốm*,” people would [use it to] speak about ladies and women, [when]

they very young, they are youthful, they are *still* beautiful— you get it? *Cóm* is everything that has to do with young women in the countryside in this region— but not in other regions they don't have this [saying]. Just this region, they say, “*cóm* is just a girl.”

Hoa: ah [okay], in this region....

Ong Liên: In this region, the women are beautiful. “You seem very *cóm*” means that the person is a beautiful lady; still youthful, still pretty. Or a woman who is older on the outside is “still very *cóm*,” meaning that she is still beautiful.

In other words, “*cóm*” is a word that villagers use to distinguish rural women—their women—from those of the urban center. Like grains of pure, unadulterated rice grains, freshly plucked from the fields, Mễ Trì women are “*cóm*” because they are modest and unaffected; their beauty lies in a natural charm that can only be produced in the countryside.

This youthful and naïve beauty that *cóm* and *cóm*-selling women embody is a characteristic that Hanoians cherish precisely because it feels somehow familiar, as if a reflection of a more innocent period of their lives. Such nostalgia for the familiarity is a critical part of *cóm*'s appeal because, for a large number of Hanoi's city-dwelling *cóm* consumers, the taste, smell, and sight of *cóm* reminds of the countryside as a place of kinship and childhood affection. A number of scholars have shown that urban residents of Hanoi and Hồ Chí Minh City maintain affective, sociocultural, economic, and I would add *sensorial*, attachment to the countryside because urbanites still regard it as the site of their ancestral origins (Jellema 2005, Harms 2011, Karis 2013, Gillen 2015). Particularly in Hanoi, which is increasingly becoming a “city of migrants” (Li 1996), these countryside origins remain important sources of cultural values and personal and social identity given that urbanites rarely have multi-generational ties to Hanoi (Karis 2013). Jellema explains the logics behind peoples' widespread affection for the countryside in her reflection on the Vietnamese concept of “*quê hương*,” the native place/homeland:

[*quê hương*] is closely associated with birth, childhood, mother love, ancestral lands,

family history, village community and a simple rural life; in short, *quê hương* represents a feeling of being fundamentally at home. (Jellema 2005, 73).

Jellema also suggests that *quê hương* is the “second womb,” where a person is nurtured by the community, and “from which young people must be born a second time when they reach maturity and venture out into the world” (Ibid). What’s more, even generations after venturing out of the native land, urban Vietnamese continue to return to countryside (*về quê*) to pay their respects to the ancestors, particularly during important holidays and community festivals. Thus, even for those born in the bustling cityscape, certain sensorial images and smells may still evoke childhood memories of experiencing agrarian village life during routine yearly visits.

The symbolic discourse of *cốm*’s agrarian origins in Hanoi’s public memory is consistent with Hanoians’ pervasive and enduring attachments to the countryside settings of their *quê hương*. Nguyễn Huy Bình expresses such sentimental connections in his claim that “eating a piece of *cốm* is swallowing all of the flavors of the rice fields of our ancestors into our hearts” (Nguyễn 2012, 156). Given that Hanoians perpetuate the imagination of *cốm* floating into the alleys and streets of Hanoi from the countryside, the sensorial experience of buying and tasting *cốm* enables such people to transport themselves, every Fall, back to the comfort and youthful simplicity of their rural origins. Hanoians’ feelings towards the sight and smell of *cốm* are powerful because they are almost always nostalgic, serving to remind people of a bygone era in which *cốm* could be purchased and consumed in a setting of community, leisure and tradition—whether this took place during autumn in the streets of Hanoi or in the dark living rooms of village homes. Nostalgia for a past environment therefore explains peoples’ sentiment-filled descriptions in written recollections about Hanoi’s autumnal abundance, the women who sell *cốm* in traditional peasant

clothes, and the communal nature in which they had once ate *côm*.³⁶ As Mandy Thomas and Lisa Drummond (2003) have pointed out, rural images like these “project a sense that the countryside is the repository of traditional values, national identity, that life in the village is more peaceful and that relationships there are based upon emotion rather than money” (8). In their symbolic linkages with the countryside and the past, narrative memories of *côm* resonate with broader contemporary discourses that romanticize rural life as a commentary about the present urban condition.

Yet, the value of *côm* not only exists in the realm of signs and symbols; *côm*’s romantic images and affective associations also have real market implications in that *côm*’s symbols directly contribute to its price. *Côm* is usually sold at around 200,000 VND per kg, compared to the price of regular white rice at 20,000 VND per kg³⁷, which requires as much, if not more, labor processes to produce. The product attains its higher price point because of its limited seasonal availability but also, and more importantly, because of people’s longstanding sentiments towards *côm*. Sentiment is never completely divorced from the product; rather, it emerges during market transactions between *côm* retailers and its urban consumers and heightens when *côm* is shared with others. As such, we may consider that *côm* represents a product that is not merely a commodity to be exchanged for money, but it is also a gift that invites further interpersonal relations in the market, within the community, and between urbanites and their ancestors. *Côm* is also a unique kind of agrarian delicacy in that its distinctive symbolic value comes from both its representation of Vietnam’s agrarian histories and people, but also in its actual role as a gift. It is a product whose

³⁶ Professor Vũ, who we heard from above, writes about his early experiences of tasting *côm* in a way that succinctly captures a wistfulness for the warmth and tranquility of the rural atmosphere: “In October, in the past, in the countryside, when the harvest is over, families often offer *côm* to eat [...] it was delightful and heavenly to sit next to friends and family and pick—in pinches—green *côm* and place it into our mouths, washed down with hot cups of green tea.” (Vũ 1999, 53)

³⁷ Approximately \$10 USD per kilogram for *côm* versus approximately \$1 USD per kilogram of regular rice.

end value is only realized through the act of giving, whether as a gift from inferiors to superiors, as a contribution to the bride and groom during weddings, or as an offering to the spirits on ancestral altars. *Cóm* is hardly ever purchased to be immediately consumed by the buyers themselves. It is a product that, when exchanged, establishes and renews social and moral ties between individuals, in both the living world and in the realm of the spirits.

A number of scholars have made similar ethnographic and theoretical premises about the gift-like interpersonal relations that drive the circulation of goods between the producer-suppliers, consumers and those who receive such items as gifts (Tsing 2013; Gregory 1982; Sprenger 2017). In his work on the transcultural exchange of “ethnic goods” between various ethnic communities in the bazaars of Laos, Sprenger (2017) suggests that the gift-like quality of certain goods emerges from the inalienability of the products from their originating persons when passed onto the hands of others. In other words, when the value of a particular good depends on its continued attachment to the producer, the product has more resemblance to Mauss’s “gift” than Marx’s alienated commodity. Sprenger argues that within such processes of transcultural exchanges, since “the exchange value of an item partially lies in its origin in a particular cultural context, alienability remains incomplete” (4); he suggests that the exchange value of the ethnic goods on the market lies in the origins of the product and that the origins in themselves contain a symbolic assessment of quality for those who buy the products. As I have described above, origins are integral to the exchange value of *cóm* given that the product’s agrarian sources shape consumer evaluations regarding its quality and health benefits. Nevertheless, agrarian origins do not fully explain the distinctively high value of *cóm* to urban consumer given that, while it is produced from agriculture, it is not a peasant product—a treat to be eaten by ordinary persons living in the agrarian countryside. Rather, *cóm*’s ties to agrarian peoples and places exist merely in the production

process, while its distribution and consumption is oriented towards the urban, particularly urbanites of higher socioeconomic status.

A number of writers suggest that *cốm* is valuable precisely because it is an agrarian product of urban standards—one that represents the luxury and elegance of Hanoi elite culture as well as the simplicity and warmth of the rural village. Take for example the following descriptions of *cốm* in two volumes on Hanoi’s culinary traditions:

Cốm has brought to the entire country, the people of Hanoi in particular, a unique food that is both valuable (*quý giá*) and rural (*dân dã*), but that also contributes a beautiful feature to the culinary culture of the elegant people of Trang An (Hanoi). (Bùi 2002. 306)

Cốm is a special gift that is common (*bình dân*) and luxurious (*sang trọng*) at the same time. (Nguyễn 2012, 155)

Such portrayals of *cốm* suggest that “the rural” acts as merely an image resource that shapes the product’s unique taste and fragile character. However, *com*’s affiliation with luxury and elegance make it an otherwise urban and high-class delicacy. *Cốm* is a product whose distinctive materiality even affords it with a particularly urbane way of being consumed, which Vũ (1999) eloquently describes below:

It is only after eating *cốm* that one would know its fragrance, softness, and intimately rich taste. No one puts a handful of *cốm* into their mouths; no one would take a spoon to scoop it; and no one would eat any fruit or meat along with *cốm*. It needs to be eaten by the grain. It needs to be pinched by the pinch-ful. It needs to be chewed leisurely (*thong thả*), carefully, deliberately and modestly. It is a food that feels graceful (*dịu dàng*), calm, soft, fragrant, and rich, but also very unique (*lạ lùng*). (53)

Another writer, Nguyễn Huy Bình adds that it is a method of eating that reflects one’s sophisticated comportment, such that, “When you pick up *cốm*, you must use your fingers to pinch few pieces at a time, carefully and tenderly, gently, in a refined manner (Nguyễn 2012,156). In other words, such writings confirm that despite *com*’s supposedly agrarian origins, the product’s urban admirers

require *cốm* to be eaten in a *civilized* manner to reflect the consumer's progressive and distinctly non-peasant status.

In many ways, the story of *cốm* floating into Hanoi with the autumn breeze speaks to the co-constitutive nature of Vietnam's rural-urban distinctions, wherein rural and urban define categories of everyday practices and imaginative discourses that inform peoples' experiences of the city and the countryside (Gillen 2013). At times, *cốm* serves to remind people of the virtue, warmth, and benevolence to be found in the Vietnamese countryside. During other moments, it stands for luxury, elegance and the refined culture of its primarily urban clientele. As it happens, the identities and values of such urban clients emerge precisely through their opposition to the backwards and uncivilized countryside.

This narrative about Hanoi's gentle autumn breeze endures as symbolic image in contemporary discourses about *cốm* even though, in reality, shopping malls, skyscrapers, and five-lane highways have replaced all of the farmlands of Vòng and Mễ Trì villages. Urban growth and the loss of agricultural land in Hanoi has worked to further elevate the symbolic value of the countryside, its products, and people. This is because urban dwellers increasingly perceive the countryside as the embodiment of a bygone Vietnamese society within which the simplicity and "pre-modern" customs of everyday life reflect all the good that is lost in today's urban modernity (Drummond 2003, 163). Thus, perhaps it was not just hard work, creativity, and diligence that led Mễ Trì to triumph in developing their craft into a successful village industry and nationally-recognized heritage. Rather, it was Mễ Trì's astute ability to build upon and sustain an image of their village as a peaceful and traditional agrarian village in their sales presentations and narratives about Mễ Trì's longer rice growing history.

Agrarian Moralities:

Côm's symbolic association with agrarian people and landscapes corresponds with what Christopher Mayes describes as an "agrarian imaginary," produced by its consumers as well as producers in the process of reaching a particular moral vision for society (Mayes 2014). Borrowing from Charles Taylor's (2004) notion of social imaginary³⁸, Mayes conceives of an "agrarian imaginary" to consist of certain shared visions and expectations regarding food production and consumption that idealize the practice of engaging in agriculture as a source of individual and community virtue (Mayes 2014, 273). Applying this concept in his investigation of urban agriculture's normative appeal, he writes:

The agrarian imaginary bridges divisions between rural and urban life through mutual commitment to food practices informed by agrarian ideals [...]. The narratives, images and goals of these practices weave into and sustain an agrarian imaginary of the idyllic and therapeutic nature of rural and agrarian life that serves as a remedy to the destructiveness of industrialization and the city. (Ibid, 76)

While writing on North America, Mayes' understanding of rural life as a resource for rejuvenating the moral status of cities resonates with what Vietnam scholars (see Drummond 2013 and Harms 2011) have noted about the consolatory effects that images of pure and virtuous countryside have on urban dwellers. Harms describes such Vietnamese agrarian imaginaries to act as "a kind of escapist pain reliever for distinctly urban headaches" (Harms 2011, 196).

Vietnam's agrarian imaginaries can be best understood with respect to the longstanding and recurring oppositions between the urban and rural (also the city vs. countryside, *thành thị và nông thôn*) in Vietnamese discourses on development and modernity. which often wavers between

³⁸ Taylor envisions a social imaginary as a moral framework of imagined ideas held between community members about the character of their society, including common principles on social existence, social relations, and proper conduct, as well as the "the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations" (Taylor 2004, 23)

two imaginations of the rural. Sometimes these narratives portray the countryside as poor and backwards and other times, they praise the countryside as a place that is pure and honest. Reflecting on the nostalgic commemorations of the rural in Vietnamese contemporary media, Lisa Drummond (2003) writes:

Urban society is cold, modern and stressful; rural society is warm, traditional and timeless, and peaceful. This characterization intersects with the perception of urban life as spiritually or morally bankrupt, as lacking a spiritual or ideological centre that would hold urban society together as a civilised entity. Rural life, with its close contact with nature, is seen as much more spiritual, more balanced, morally richer and stronger in community feeling” (163)

In what Harms refers to as “double symbolism” between urban society and rural Vietnam, contemporary urbanites may not want to return the countryside to live, but they are nostalgic for the rural because they imagine it to represent Vietnam’s previous, uncorrupted, pre-colonial society (Harms 2011). In such an imagination, the countryside contains both the pure and authentic Vietnamese traditions as well as all the solidarity and moral righteousness that has been lost in the urban sphere due to modernization. These prevalent moral understandings of the countryside are important to our present day understanding of *cóm*’s symbolic value to consumers because rural-urban dichotomies also shape contemporary peoples’ evaluations of food products, based on the kind of places and the people from which they imagine the food to originate (Kurfurst 2017). In accordance with the food quality assessments of modern Vietnamese consumers, a large part of *cóm*’s allure to Hanoi urbanites lies in the product’s enduring connections to an evidently uncorrupted countryside of morally-robust, hardworking peasants who supply the city with clean and healthy food.

Mễ Trì’s narratives about the quality and taste of their *cóm* appear to draw from the broader agrarian imaginary that valorizes the countryside as a place of moral integrity in contrast to a

chaotic and corrupted urban sphere. The commercial images that *cốm* producers and retailers, as well as local officials use to advertise their products strategically draw from the village's historical title as Hanoi's rice pond to appeal to the expectations of its urban consumers about the how food should be produced. Such images do so by depicting Mễ Trì as a place that was once "*thuận nông*," which I translate here as, "purely agrarian" given that the term primarily focuses on the specific character of the village's craft-makers as cultivators, which they deem to embody virtue. When explaining to me Mễ Trì's history of producing *cốm*, villagers often used the concept of "*thuận nông*" to describe the universal and all-encompassing role of subsistence agriculture (*tự cung tự cấp*) in the village prior to urbanization, which they believed was central to the moral development of the Mễ Trì people. In its discursive use, "pure agrarianism" is used, not just to describe the village's history, practices, and landscape of agriculture, but also to specifically demonstrate the virtuous disposition of those engaged in such kinds of strenuous work.

As Mễ Trì's Cultural Affairs officer Tuấn told me, when the majority of people here were doing agriculture, "it was strenuous but, because the *essence* (*bản chất*) of Mễ Trì is 'purely agrarian,' people still cultivated and engaged in agriculture." The point that Tuấn makes through this statement is not that Mễ Trì people were simply incapable of engaging in activities other than agriculture, but that it is in their inherent nature to persevere. The idea of pure agrarianism paints an image of Mễ Trì farmers and *cốm* producers as diligent and steadfast, even in the face of adversity. The villagers' self-made success underscores a kind of virtue that comes out of their uniquely agrarian experience of toiling through misfortunate circumstances. Such a moral character is comparable to Jeffersonian-inspired ideas of "agrarian virtue" in the North American tradition, which exalt farmers for possessing a lived ethics of stewardship, hard work and self-reliance (Thompson 2010; Mayes 2014; Wirzba 2003; Berry 2009). These latter understandings

of agrarian virtue purport that through the act of cultivation, farmers develop an ability to “directly/practically see and feel [their] connections with each other and the land,” and as a result, they have strong feelings of responsibility to ‘protect, preserve, and celebrate [the] life,’ and gifts of both land and people (Wirzba 2003, 6). The main premise of agrarian virtue, according to Mễ Trì producers and North American visionaries alike is that agricultural societies are predisposed to producing morally honest citizens because, as Thompson synopsizes, “people living under social and material conditions conducive to virtue should tend to be virtuous” (Thompson 2010, 8).

The virtue of perseverance, which villagers have long cultivated alongside the moral associations of rice and *cốm*, invites others to trust in the honest and diligent labor of a purely agrarian community that continues to provide them—as they have done for centuries—with genuine and reliable handmade food. In Mễ Trì’s collective appeal to Hanoi’s ministries for their *cốm* to be considered as a national heritage, the village writers specifically capture the importance of their agrarian virtue by describing the social and cultural benefits of Mễ Trì’s moral action as farmers and craft producers for the broader society of Hanoi (and Vietnam):

The process of developing the trade of *cốm* is always connected to the industriousness (*cần cù*), meticulousness (*tỉ mỉ*), one dew and two suns of the farmers. *Cốm* is a product that farmers created and made and *cốm* adds to hearts of people, from the grains of very ordinary *cốm*, it was a food that saved people from hunger and turned into a food that is the quintessence of the land of the Capital (Ủy Ban Nhân Dân Mễ Trì. 2019).

This description conjures up an image of rice farmers carefully attending to each grain of young rice as they toil knee-deep in muddy rice fields, all for the sake of supplying Hanoi with its treasured *cốm*. Through such kinds of declarations, Mễ Trì producers are able to take advantage of a deep-rooted agrarian imaginary about the moral righteousness of Vietnamese agricultural

producers in order to make a larger claim about their role in contemporary society. Such an assertion purports that Mễ Trì villagers' hard work as farmers and *cốm* producers not only supplies Hanoi with a valuable culinary product, but such virtuous actions also contribute to the production of distinctive and essential culture of Hanoi—it's quintessence. The continued invocation of pure agrarianism as a symbol and image of the village's pre-urban identity thereby paints Mễ Trì as a place that has long contributed to the wealth and spirit of the nation through agrarian production.

The Taste of Virtue:

In addition to highlighting the virtue of their labor, Mễ Trì's claims about their history of pure agrarianism also serve to evidence the high quality of their *cốm*. In Vietnam's present urban context of widespread consumer anxiety over product origins and food safety, Mễ Trì producers strategically position their *cốm* within emerging food quality standards that value "pure" and "clean" and "safe" food, as opposed to unreliable processed food (purportedly) coming from China (Kurfürst 2017; Werthem-Heck 2015; Werthem-Heck et. al 2014; Moustier et al. 2010; Figuié et. al 2019). Producers suggest that Mễ Trì *cốm* is "natural" (*tự nhiên*) and "fresh" (*tươi*) because it is made by the hands of virtuous people who put as much care and diligence into the work of producing *cốm* as they did in cultivating rice. They demonstrate their commitment to providing Hanoi with a quality agricultural food product by emphasizing that they do not add food coloring or chemicals to alter the flavor or appearance of their *cốm*. In other words, they contend that Mễ Trì *cốm* is "pure" (*mọc*) and therefore safe because, for the most part, its quality is still determined by its agrarian source and the hands of its formerly agrarian producers. As such, *cốm* itself is left unadulterated by any visible industrial methods other than the mechanized versions of traditional production tools. As the villagers often assured to me, in one variation of this statement or another,

cóm is 100% pure because “there is nothing to it, it is just fresh *cóm*,” plucked directly from the fields. Purity has become Mễ Trì com’s unique selling point to urban consumers; it stands out as a characteristic of food quality that people conceive of as even more important to the product’s perceivable “authenticity” than com’s traceable ancestral roots in Vòng village. Practices and discourses of agrarian purity therefore served as the main marketing strategy that enabled Mễ Trì to eventually gain significant economic advantage over Vòng Village.

Mễ Trì’s dominance over Hanoi’s market for *cóm* was a matter of good timing as well as astutely prompt action in response to a situation that would have otherwise placed the reputation and value of *cóm* in jeopardy. In 2011, Vòng *cóm* producers and retailers faced an unexpected market crisis when rumors began to circulate in the local media suggesting that the producers used food coloring in the processing of their *cóm*. According to such media reports, food inspectors in Hanoi had discovered the presence of toxic chemical dye in *cóm* sold in various markets in Hanoi. Given Vòng village longstanding fame among urban consumers as the *cóm* craft village of Hanoi, Vòng producers and retailers were hit particularly hard by the food dye accusations even though, at the time, the majority of Vòng’s *cóm* on the market was actually re-processed *cóm* from Mễ Trì village. The food dye incident is well-known among Hanoi’s urban dwellers; it is a story that has spawned further speculation regarding the overall safety and hygiene of eating *cóm*. One colleague of mine in Hanoi even insisted that *cóm* sellers spray water from their mouths onto *cóm* before weighing it in order to make more money selling heavier packages.

These allegations show that consumer anxieties over food dying did not merely concern chemicals, but they were part of a larger public uneasiness about the moral character of *cóm* producers and sellers as participants of an increasingly unreliable food economy governed by dishonest and profit-hungry capitalists. In China, similar incidences of consumer anxiety and

public distrust in food providers are not only prevalent, but this phenomenon is also well-documented in the scholarship on food safety and public health (see for example, Yan 2012; Yang 2013; Klein 2013; Mol 2014; Liu and Ma 2016; Wu et. al 2017). In the context of an industrializing food system, Chinese consumers are not only concerned about food hygiene and the accidental contamination of foodstuffs from agrochemicals, but they are also increasingly worried about the circulation of “poisonous food” (Yan 2012)—food that has been deliberately contaminated by illegal toxic chemicals. According to Yan (ibid), the defining features of “poisonous foods” can be seen in the moral characteristics of the food producers themselves who intentionally deceive and injure their customers. “Because they are fully aware of the illegality of their actions, the harm to consumers, and the punishment if they are to be caught,” Yan writes, “the retailers of toxic foods resort to hiding the true nature of their foodstuffs and sell them as normal and healthy products” (ibid, 716).

Many scholars have suggested that China’s food safety crises are characteristic of an emerging “risk society” (Beck 1995) that is pre-occupied with debating, preventing and managing the risks created by modern industrialization; Cheng (2012) has also similarly described these food crimes as the byproduct of “cheap capitalism,” marked by “low prices, inferior quality and unsafe condition of goods or services to maximize profits” (254). Such notions can also be used to describe Vietnam’s growing public anxieties over food safety, particularly among urban consumers (see Figuié et. al 2019). As Kurfürst has observed in her ethnographic research on food safety in Hanoi, food vendors frequently draw on images of their (supposed) village origins (their *quê*) to ensure customers that their products are safe, clean and fresh (Kurfürst 2017). In the context of the *cóm* food dye incident, Mễ Trì *cóm* producers have similarly drawn on their ancestral history and knowledge as former rice farmers in order to establish a reputation in Hanoi as uncorrupt

providers of a “pure” (*mọc*) food product that is safe and healthy to eat by virtue of its rural origins.

Because the food dying incident had a market-wide impact that also slowed down sales in Mễ Trì village, producers and retailers in Mễ Trì began to consciously distance themselves from Vòng village in order to salvage their own reputation and economy. To distinguish their *cốm* from Vòng’s, Mễ Trì’s producers and retailers started to build a brand identity based on notions of “purity” that manifest in their production practices as well as in the aesthetics of the product itself. While vehemently spurning the use of coloring, preservatives and other additives in the production process, Mễ Trì producers also refashioned the public image their *cốm* in a way that gives the greatest attention to the product’s purity. Unlike Vòng’s *cốm*, which is traditionally a bright and resplendent jade color, Mễ Trì’s *cốm* has a dull chartreuse tint. Yet, producers now proudly point to their product’s less pleasing semblance as physical proof of their commitment to making unadulterated and therefore safe-to-eat *cốm*. As Mrs. Lê from Mễ Trì Thượng describes below, in the early days, the producers and retailers of Mễ Trì needed to first re-educate consumers about the true and authentic color of pure *cốm*.

In the old days Vòng village had dyed their product so that it would be beautiful. But now, the safety of the product is the most important. The customers have been eating beautiful green *cốm* and then all of a sudden, they see the pure *cốm*, they are afraid that this *cốm* is fake, but it is not true.

Like many others, Mrs. Lê distributes her *cốm* in green plastic bags that state “pure *cốm*” alongside the name of her household workshop. She noted that while the products are not as beautiful as in the old days (when Vòng dominated the market), because consumers knew that her *cốm* is “clean” (*sạch*), they began to enjoy the “natural taste” of her pure, unadulterated *cốm*. The distinctive chartreuse color of Mễ Trì’s *cốm* has become so important to the brand identity of the village’s craft product that a yellowish-green color, rather than artificial jade green, is now featured in

government reports as well as poems about the village's *cốm*. Present day poetry now describes Mễ Trì's *cốm* as "the pale color of the spring sun."³⁹ Because the food dying incident generated consumer ambivalence towards a particular shade of green that, Mễ Trì's success in salvaging their reputation involved a strategic re-writing of public discourses on *cốm* to accept yellow-green as a marker of purity as well as authenticity. These days, even Vòng villagers maintain the chartreuse color of Mễ Trì *cốm* when selling *cốm* on the streets of Hanoi in order to fit their products with new consumer perceptions of purity.

Mễ Trì producers not only highlight com's purity in the aesthetics of their products, but also in their insistence on full transparency. They tell stories about their formal health and safety inspections and enthusiastically invite consumers to visit their homes in order to present themselves as honest traders and producers whose products are exactly as marketed. Declarations and stories of transparency, such as Cô Liên's below, have become an integral element of Mễ Trì's sales pitches to their customers on the streets of Hanoi:

There was a guy who came and got some *cốm*, he bought 100 kg and he parked his bike, he bought 100 grams for 20,000 VND [...] and said that today he is bringing my *cốm* in for examination [at the Department of Health], I said, "feel free." I waved to him and I said, "feel free, if there are no problems then tomorrow you have to come out here and write [a confirmation document] for me [...] if there are problems then I will stop selling immediately, I will close my shop and I will not sell anymore," I guaranteed to him that [...] And if there are problems then I would quit; I would stop selling *cốm*. I guaranteed that it would be no problem [with my *cốm*] because I don't use any chemicals. So I have to say that; I have to be rigid.

As Horat (2017) has pointed out about textile traders in Ninh Hiệp, the performance of honesty (*thật thà*) is essential for traders in the marketplace because it "emphasize[s] their good business practices" (Horat 2017, 194). *Cốm* producers and retailers not only express their honest character to customers through guarantees of "fair prices," but also through their adamant declarations that

³⁹ Field notes, October 1, 2017 from attendance at the Cốm Fair in Nam Từ Liêm District.

customers would be welcome to come back to the village and verify first-hand the clean and safe production practices that produce Mễ Trì *cốm*.

Guarantees of purity and hygiene are important to Mễ Trì producers and retailers because the quality of the products also speak to the producers' virtue as contributing members of society. Amidst proliferating uneasiness about food safety of imported goods, along with the state's "buy Vietnam" campaigns for strengthening domestic consumption, the emerging role of Mễ Trì *cốm* producers as the primary producers of a local delicacy also entails a moral responsibility to ensure that the product is healthy and safe to eat. Cô Liên suggested to me that such moral convictions were also important for maintaining their trade for future generations:

If you make [*cốm*], if you have a good heart and virtue, you have to make it honestly (*thật thà*) for people to eat [...] Our good-heartedness and virtue comes from our minds (*morality begins with the mind*); if we want to keep [the trade of *cốm*] then in our hearts, we have to make it real for people [to eat]. It has to be made in a good way for their bodies; but if we put in sugars and chemicals in it, it won't be good [...] [Customers] say to me, "the *cốm* of the people who carry it around the streets is very sweet, and it is soft, but your *cốm* is not sweet at all." I say, "no, I don't have sweet *cốm*. My *cốm* is just the substance of *cốm*." I sell to regular customers; if I make it sweet, my sales will slow. To sell *cốm*, we have to have a good heart and virtue — it is not easy. If we make it, we have to make it good. If [customers] develop any diseases and we bring out those diseases in people [through *cốm*], then it is a crime towards humanity.

As expressed by Cô Liên, the semblance of purity is so important to the moral and social responsibilities of Mễ Trì craft producers that even sugar is considered a contaminant. What this logic of purity suggests is that Mễ Trì producers prove themselves as virtuous contributors to the society and economy of Hanoi only when Mễ Trì's *cốm* looks and tastes as close to its agricultural source as possible. Such claims demonstrate that virtue in Vietnam's urban food economy not only emerges in the social relations between food providers and consumers, but that virtue also has a distinctive look and taste—in the case of Mễ Trì, virtue tastes like pure, safe *cốm*!

4.5 A Government's Paper Trail of Food and Heritage

Mễ Trì's claims about heritage, purity and agrarian virtue do not merely manifest through the product itself, but increasingly, villagers establish their reputation with consumers through the material and symbolic vehicles that they have been issued by government entities. In the process of transforming the village's supplemental craft into a stable, profit-generating livelihood, Mễ Trì villagers have sought out and accepted state support in developing the craft village's distinctive brand. As a result of these state and village collaborations, villagers internalize the official language and narrative format of government craft village development initiatives. These days, village *cóm* producers and retailers increasingly represent and communicate their agrarian heritage, virtue, and purity to the general public through certain government-provided documents and visual aids, namely: printed icons of village and household logos (*thương hiệu*); framed certificates of official government recognition (*giấy công nhận*) and praise (*giấy khen*); and plastic-laminated papers verifying cleanliness and safety in food production.

Village narratives of their rice growing history and claims about moral righteousness become self-evident and indisputable once the product enters through government channels of heritage-making and quality approval. State certifications provide the villagers with a greater sense of economic security as well as legitimacy within the country's new urban-oriented industrial transformations. Mễ Trì peoples' preoccupation with using such forms of documentation for evidencing their craft distinction also highlights the role of the state in shaping the character and direction of Mễ Trì craft village development. As municipal leaders work to transform local handicraft products, such as Mễ Trì's *cóm*, into symbols of Hanoi's rich cultural heritage, they also provide these formerly agrarian craft-makers the opportunity to participate in the urban economy and society as entrepreneurs. Yet, simultaneously such government support also brings

producers who are engaged in so-called independent work (*nghe tự do*) under greater state control; such paperwork is therefore working to diminish producers' freedom from external management, which was previously discussed in Chapter Three.

The producers' heightened interest in aligning their *cóm* productions with state-driven notions of "heritage" and certification that are taking place within a broader political economic phenomenon happening both nationally as well as globally, which scholars have defined as "heritagisation" (Breidenbach and Nyíri 2007; Smith 2009; Bendix 2009; Salemink 2012; Salemink 2016). Heritagisation refers to a process through which sites, practices and objects that have locally defined meanings within the social life of particular communities become branded—as well as commoditized—as national or world "heritage." In essence, heritagization takes culture out of its living context and reifies it into observable things, which can then be evaluated, validated and valorized by outside experts, tourists and other distant admirers. Salemink (2016) describes heritagization as an "appropriation of the past and thus an attempt to control the future by certain elites that alienate other groups in the process, as well as an attempt to control the economic value of the commoditised heritage" (312). Importantly, as Salemink and others point out, this process is almost always driven by the (mostly economic) interests of authoritative figures on the national or global stage (Salemink 2016; Salemink 2013; Meeker 2013; Bendix 2009).

In the case of Vietnam, the upsurge of interest in heritage occurred in tandem with Vietnam's Đổi Mới market reforms which integrated this socialist nation into the rhythms of the global economy (Salemink 2016; Meeker 2013). In the context of market integration, culture is an important methodology for Vietnam's communist regime to produce a national identity that simultaneously legitimizes the Party-State and garners the attention of key international institutions and financiers. Meeker (2013) writes that "discourses on culture have been an

important source of political and cultural capital with which the Vietnamese government, intellectuals, and ordinary people represent Vietnam locally, nationally, and, increasingly, on the global stage” (2). Specifically, Vietnam’s shifting formulation of culture as cultural heritage (*di sản văn hoá*) rather than traditional culture (*văn hoá truyền thống*) in public policies has become an important post-Doi Moi strategy for establishing its credibility as a modern nation participating in internationally-recognized practices of cultural protection (ibid, 14). As Salemink (2013) has pointed out, “nationally, the politics of heritage help establish political legitimacy for Vietnam’s postsocialist Communist regime; internationally, UNESCO recognition puts Vietnam on the global radar screen as an old civilization and venerable culture” (158-159). Since UNESCO’s recognition of the ancient Huế citadel as a UNESCO world heritage site, Vietnam has passed a number of statutes on culture and heritage (such as the 1998 Resolution Five and the Law on Heritage 2001) which promote and monumentalize a nationalist vision of modern Vietnamese culture. Nevertheless, these laws and regulations ultimately support state-led practices of identifying and promoting national heritage for the purposes of tourism and economic development.

Such strategies for promoting and protecting Vietnam’s cultural heritage are also informed by inter-city politics, particularly between the current financial capital of Hồ Chí Minh City and the administrative capital of Hanoi—the seat of the Communist Party. At the level of the city, handicrafts, and the villages that produce craft products, have become important to Hanoi city plans as symbolic capital, used by developers and municipal leaders as tools for validating the distinction of Hanoi as Vietnam’s “heroic capital” (*thủ đô anh hùng*) of elegant and civilized culture. The transformation of local craft artifacts, such as *cốm*, into symbols of Hanoi’s cultural heritage, constitutes the city’s broader political-economic strategy of curating a unique and

competitive image for itself—relative to other Vietnamese cities— to attract greater financial capital. In this economy of symbols, emblems of unique culture and history provide cities (particularly global cities) with a competitive edge relative to others for harnessing the market of consumption, such that “visual representation [becomes] a means of financially representing the city” (Zukin 1996, 44). Given the significance of the surrounding Red River Delta region in the longer history of Vietnam’s formation, Hanoi is at a comparative advantage to its national rival, Hồ Chí Minh City in terms of access to rich and diverse symbolic capital. As sociologist Sharon Zukin has argued, “the symbolic economy of a global city shapes the lingua franc of global elites,” working to facilitate global investment and international tourism (Ibid, 45). Amassing cultural artifacts and designating them simultaneously as heritage of Hanoi and of the larger nation is part of Hanoi’s strategy for leveraging its status in the global economy, because, as Zukin points out, “[the city’s] symbolic economy of cultural meanings and representations implies real economic power” (Ibid, 44).

Hanoi’s strategic use of village handicrafts as symbolic capital is evident in municipal policies for supporting craft village, which primarily work to support the city’s larger socio-economic development master plan. Since the expansion of Hanoi’s administrative boundaries in 2008, which increased the city’s spatial area to 3.6 times its previous size, municipal leaders have passed a number of policy decisions for developing rural craft villages⁴⁰ in order to steer these recently incorporated rural economies towards industrialization, modernization and tourism. Hanoi leaders anticipate that, by 2030, craft villages will contribute to 8.9% of the total industrial

⁴⁰ Eg., Decision 22/2008 in 2008 on “Promulgating Policies to Support and Develop Hanoi’s Trades and Craft Villages”; Decision 85/2009 in 2009 “Regulations on the Consideration of ‘Trademark Recognition’ for Hanoi’s Traditional Craft Villages; and the 2013 Decision for “Developing Vocational Training and Craft Villages in Hanoi towards 2010, with a vision towards 2030.”

production value of the entire city (Ủy Ban Nhân Dân Thành Phố Hà Nội 2013). State regulations and decisions intend to reach their goals by transforming these independent rural crafts-makers into “entrepreneurs” with high professional and managerial qualifications (Ibid), whose craft products and production workshops would be up to standard for international trade and tourism. The Ministry of Industry and Trade spearheads efforts to recognize rural craft villages as “Hanoi traditional craft villages,” a title that not only gives such communities with an official certificate of accreditation, but also funding support,⁴¹ and state privileges with regards to industrialization and development activities.

Hanoi’s efforts to industrialize its traditional handicrafts are a part of the state’s official strategy for transforming handicrafts into “intangible cultural heritage” (*di sản phi vật thể*), which according Article 24 in the 2011 Law on Heritage, involves government-led actions of “maintenance”) *duy trì*, “restoration” *phục hồi*, as well as “development” *phát triển* (Quốc Hội Nước Cộng Hoà Xã Hội Chủ Nghĩa Việt Nam 2001). In practice, such activities demonstrate that heritagization is also a process of commodifying cultural goods and converting village-produced and owned culture into state property, which can then be instrumentalized to fit the agendas of various policymakers and elites at the municipal and national levels (Meeker 2013; Salemink 2013; Bendix 2009). Salemink (2016) writes that “heritage claims invariably bring in the state as the arbiter, guarantor, and protector of heritage [...] motivated by ideas of prestige but also of economic gain by capitalising on the heritage label” (319-320). In order to bring local handicrafts up to international standards of safety and quality, the industrialization of heritage products in Vietnam has also meant that handicrafts are subjected to external forms of management and

⁴¹ Funding support for approved craft villages is a one-time 5 million VND for building and designing a village craft “trademark” (*thương hiệu*), 100% costs covered for renting stalls at national fairs and exhibitions, and 50% of the costs covered for renting stalls and transportation for participating in fairs and exhibitions overseas (Ủy Ban Nhân Dân Thành Phố Hà Nội).

evaluation by outside “experts”—those without knowledge of the craft’ deeper meanings and roles within the social lives and histories of village producers. Taken out of their sociocultural contexts, these handicrafts take on increasingly monetized values, which have come to represent measures of product “quality.” Bendix has pointed out such regimes of quality control and evaluation in the heritage industry “bear witness to the existence of ‘audit culture,’ of using accounting and financial management tactics (numbers!) to govern people and organizations—in this case, producers of heritage (Bendix 2009, 264; Shore 1999, Strathern 2000). In the case of Vietnam’s handicrafts, this type of audit culture materializes in the form of trademarks and paperwork certifying the legitimacy and quality of cultural products that have been formally recognized as national “heritage.”

Since 2008, trademarking (*xây dựng thương hiệu*, meaning building a trademark) has grown to become a fundamental component of craft village development policies, as a method for enhancing the caliber of craft products so that they can be competitive next to foreign commodities in the global economy. Mr. Lưu Duy Dần, the Chairman of Vietnam Craft Villages Association pointed out in recent interviews with national news media that the lack of domestic trademarks stand out as the biggest barrier to craft village expansion, and that 90% of craft producers currently draw on foreign designs and labels. The Chairman notes, “there is still a perception that the trade village has a long tradition, so [its reputation] will be known by itself. While in fact, if [we] don’t invest in building and promoting a trademark, it is difficult for the name of the craft village to cross the administrative boundaries of the locality, let alone outside the national borders” (Phuong Anh 2017). Hence, trademark design and promotion are one of the key activities that craft villages must fulfill under the state conditions of its support. Product safety and hygiene certifications are another state mechanism for bringing local village crafts towards international production standards, as a

means of establishing trust among both domestic and foreign consumers. In Mễ Trì, and perhaps other craft villages, the labels and documents that are attached to such state-led development efforts have since shaped and integrated with village narratives about craft origins and trade secrets, becoming a primary framework for producers and retailers to express the unique character and quality of their products.

In 2017, city officials granted Mễ Trì village the title of “Hanoi traditional craft village,” and in early 2019, Mễ Trì’s *cốm* received the even higher honor of “intangible national heritage” (*di sản phi vật thể quốc gia*). In tandem with such recognition, paperwork verifying labor safety and product hygiene have become even more integral to Mễ Trì *cốm* producers and retailers’ marketing strategies. Cô Liên of 39 Hàng Than, calls it a “certificate of purity,” and like others, she safeguards the paper inside of a plastic folder that is with her at all times, in case customers ever express concerns about the quality of her *cốm*. Meanwhile, the producers and retailers now also wield printed village logos and certificates as evidence of their legitimate and privileged status as artisan-entrepreneurs in Hanoi’s urban economy. Such state-issued certificates of praise and recognition lie behind gold frames on the walls inside the homes of *cốm* producers; they are also displayed at craft fairs and exhibitions, alongside the new village trademark. In many ways, these official titles and trademarks have secured Mễ Trì’s monopoly over *cốm* production in Vietnam. Bác Tùng explains that their village trademark is a copyright over the product such that almost all of Hanoi’s *cốm* is now legally tied to Mễ Trì, no matter who sells or produces it:

I will tell you in this way: now you can produce a cup; I did not produce the cup, but I sign up for a trademark. That is my *cốm*, not your *cốm*. This cup is mine, not yours. It is like that (*laughs*).

Mễ Trì *cốm* producers and retailers are hopeful that their new official titles will thereby undermine

Vòng's original claims to the product and simultaneously cement the symbolic association between *cóm* and Hanoi's former rice pond. As Mễ Trì Ward's Cultural Affairs Officer Tuấn explains, "Vòng village['s title] is only known from local sayings, they don't have a trademark (*thương hiệu*) now. They don't have a certificate that recognizes that it is a craft village." In Hanoi's economy of symbols, these official state documents take precedence and validate all other claims and evidence regarding heritage, origins, ethics, and quality.

In effect, the process of recognizing village craft products as traditional or heritage objects of Hanoi is the state's method of exercising ownership and control over the region's people and cultures. Such objectives are even clearly marked in the official policies themselves, such as in Decision 85/2009 on "Regulations for the consideration of 'trademark recognition' for Hanoi traditional craft villages," which states, under Article 3 that the purpose of trademarking is to "enhance and improve the effectiveness and efficiency of state management over industry and handicrafts in the area" (Ủy Ban Nhân Dân Thành Phố Hà Nội 2009). In a sense, state recognition and trademarking establish what Matthew Hull (2012) calls a "government of paper," a regime in which the state's bureaucratic documents (it's "graphic artifacts") act as semiotic technologies of governance. By bestowing craft villages with protected trademarks of heritage and tradition, the state also prescribes certain standards upon the recipients that make craft production and sales activities legible and thus easier to regulate by state officials (even while the producers remain convinced that they engage in independent work, *nghề tự do*).

Borrowing from Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (2005), Oscar Salemink (2016) has written that heritagization constitutes "a form of separation and hence alienation of the cultural sites, objects, practices, and knowledge from the people who produced, managed, or embodied these products of their ritual labour" (339) In this process, heritage has become increasingly a

representation of the interests, perspectives and goals of outside policymakers; heritage, as Debord would say, “a visual reflection of the ruling economic order” (Debord 2005, 10). As Meeker (2013) has also pointed out in her work on Vietnam’s heritagization of folk songs in Bắc Ninh province, state projects of heritagization in Vietnam involve selective listening as well as silencing of local voices; in order to support the Party state’s vision of modern Vietnam as a “progressive culture imbued with national identity, the national discourse on heritage “‘hears’ the stories that contribute to it and dismisses those that would critique it” (67). Through its dual actions of silencing local voices and alienating heritage producers from their culture (cultural practices, heritagization shows it itself as another process of what Harvey (2005) has called, “accumulation by dispossession,” through which cultural products become just one more property for the dominant elite to use to their advantage (Salemink 2016).

Nevertheless, it is important to note, particularly in the case of Mễ Trì *cốm*’s heritage recognition, that the process of making and claiming heritage is not merely top-down. At the grassroots level, the producers of culture may also benefit from transforming their cultural practices, sites, and goods into heritage commodities and are therefore “willingly participate in the process of seeking cultural validation from up above in pursuit of their own agendas” (Salemink 2013, 163). For Mễ Trì *cốm* producers, heritage recognition by state authorities extinguishes their longstanding rivalry with Vòng village and helps to solidify Mễ Trì *cốm*’s dominance and superiority in the market. Additionally, as I will explain further below, heritage recognition also gives producers greater leverage in requesting for additional land and subsidies to support the expansion of their village craft. In essence, Mễ Trì’s second experience of “dispossession”—this time, of their cultural goods as heritage—also gives them an opportunity to negotiate access to land and other assets, which may potentially lead them to “repossess” the very things that they lost

to urban development. Because of these benefits, producers are willing to sacrifice some of the “freedom” that they enjoy as independent entrepreneurs to gain the state’s endorsement of their products as national heritage.

Interestingly, state policies for developing craft villages have also worked to reconfigure entrenched rural-urban dichotomies, by giving formerly agrarian peoples elevated status and special privileges in an urban economy and society. The success of craft villages, such as Mễ Trì, demonstrates the existence of a symbolic economy of agrarian societies in urban spaces, wherein symbolic materials representing the region’s agricultural history work to enrich Hanoi’s public image, painting the city as the cradle of Vietnam’s profuse and diverse cultures. At the same time, this symbolic economy has also built a platform for these formerly agricultural craft-makers to indirectly express their grievances towards land use change (particularly their loss of agricultural land), by allowing them to frame such opinions as hopes for improving their craft. For example, at Mễ Trì’s 2016 *Cốm* Craft Fair, Mễ Trì ward leaders, including *Cốm* Association leaders Mr. Hùng To, and Bác Tùng addressed their concerns about their diminishing rice fields to the district and city leaders in attendance. During his speech, Mr. Hùng To suggested that a trademark would help *cốm* production become more sustainable (*bền vững*) for future generations, but that, due to urbanization, the producers still required other material support:

when my father passed on *cốm* (to us), we mostly bought rice from nearby areas, but now they buy it from very far [...] So if the city can [help] build areas for specializing in growing rice, then we will go there to get resources for production. And that is something we really hope for. We aim to protect all the things that we produce, to protect and keep it so that *cốm* can develop in a sustainable way [so that] it will be an intangible cultural heritage of Nam Từ Liêm and Mễ Trì.

Opinions such as these are prevalent among Mễ Trì villagers and the issue of landlessness is publicly and openly discussed, as long as it ties back to craft industrialization. What this shows is

that the symbolic economy of agrarian societies in urban spaces works both ways: both the state and local craft producers can draw on the symbolism of agrarian heritage as a means of crafting identities for themselves, in urban spaces as well as within the globalizing economy.

4.6 Conclusion: Co-produced (Rural-)Urban Village Identities

Mê Trì's experiences of craft village development brings into perspective the process of land use and social transformation in spaces that had previously engaged in agricultural production. In Mê Trì, villagers and the state are continuously reworking and synthesizing the social-spatial categories of urban and rural in the process of adapting to new material conditions. Scholars of urban and agrarian studies have written extensively about the "urban transition" of agrarian spaces in Asia, such as Mê Trì, that have become integrated into the physical and social fabric of a city-centered market economy (Friedmann and Wulff 1976; Ginsburg et al. 1991; McGee 1991; Guldin 1997; Friedmann 2005). For example, McGee's seminal formulation of *deskota* (1991) captures the distinctiveness of the extended peri-urban zone in Southeast Asia as a space of hybridity and symbiotic interactions between rural (which typically means, "agricultural" or "agrarian") and urban people, practices, and values.⁴² The phenomenon of *desakoti/deskota* defies the deterministic urban transition model by showing that urbanization in Southeast Asia

⁴² McGee's seminal essay, "The Emergence of *Desakota* Regions in Asia: Expanding a Hypothesis" in *The Extended Metropolis: Settlement Transition in Asia* (1991) updated his position on the *pseudo urbanization* Southeast of Asian cities. The concept of *desakota* combines the two Indonesia terms *desa* (village) and *kota* (city) and points to symbiotic development of megaurban spaces and periurban hybrid spaces. This volume, which is also edited by Norton Ginsburg et. al (1991), argues against the application of EuroAmerican urban transition models in the Asian context. The contributing authors each expand on the concept of *desakota* (and its verb, *desakoti*) to theorize "settlement transition" of the "extended Asian metropolis" and the dynamic linkages between rural and urban spaces.

does not necessarily involve the wholesale de-agrarianization (Bryceson 1999) of agricultural spaces to accommodate urban-oriented industrial infrastructures and economies. Both T.G. McGee and Norton Ginsburg (Ginsburg et. al 1991) show that the folk-urban continuum is not a model of urban change, but rather, it represents a composite and dynamic spatial form that exists in Southeast Asian geographies. Furthermore, these extended hybrid settlements and the mega-urban centers are mutually dependent (Rigg 1997), co-productive and intertwined such that “it is becoming ever harder to talk of discrete “rural” or “urban” worlds” (Rigg 1998, 515). Such hybridity and mutuality is apparent in the case of Mễ Trì’s narrative history and contemporary economic exchanges with the urban core.

Scholarship on Asian cities continues to refine the hybrid *desakota* and rural-urban transformation frameworks. These works use ethnographic examples that demonstrate “porous” relationships between the city’s diverse built environments, economies, and people—despite the introduction of master-planned urban enclaves that attempt to fragment and segregate the city based on class differences (Harms 2015). Describing the concept of porosity and its application to contemporary urban analysis, Harms writes, “porosity is not a physical object but a set of social processes, and it emerges most clearly in ethnographic or archival research that engages with sources that integrate bottom-up views into an understanding of how top-down plans are actually enacted and inhabited” (Harms 2015, 154).

Ethnographic research focused on the social processes of urban change in Asia shows that the *desakota* (a term that most works now use interchangeably with “peri-urban”) is an important frontier zone of encounter, conflict and symbiotic exchanges between various people, values, and tangible material things (Leaf 2015). The concepts of porosity and *desakota* provide a suitable framework for explaining how state master plans for transforming Hanoi’s urban spaces and

economies shape and are in turn shaped by the goals and actions of craft producers who are adapting to their changed social and material conditions. As Danielle Labbé (2014) has argued in her work on peri-urban Hanoi, peri-urban zones at the margins of the city are spaces where “everyday grassroots practices meet, interact and sometimes clash with the state's intentionalities and with new market relationships” (13).

Scholars have also shown how China’s experiences of urbanization have produced “urban villages”⁴³ of dense cooperative low-end housing that accommodate its previously rural residents as well as new migrant workers (see Bach 2010 and Wang et al. 2009). In China’s urban villages, the encounter between enduring collective property regimes and market processes has effectively incarcerated these urban villagers who have limited social and economic mobility in the larger urban sphere—a situation that Siu calls “grounded displacement” (Siu 2007). Siu’s work suggests that enduring social-spatial categories and discourses denigrating rural peoples (as peasants) continue to immobilize urban villagers in space and society, leaving such residents with bleak futures. Erik Harms’ research (2011) on (Saigon’s) peri-urban transformations is more optimistic about the mobility of peri-urban village residents. In his research, he argues that peri-urban residents use their distinct marginal position, or “social edginess,” to oscillate between the social benefits of living in village households and the economic advantages of new work opportunities in the city. Straddling the future-oriented city and the traditional village, peri-urban peoples exist in a unique space of both marginality as well as empowerment, as their proximity to the city enables them to move back and forth between the advantages of both socioeconomic spheres.

Mễ Trì’s experience of land use change and craft development clearly employs such kinds of social edginess, as craft producers and other household entrepreneurs draw from the village’s

⁴³ Urban scholarship on Vietnam has also reflected on the emergence of “urban villages” (*làng giữa phố*) in Hanoi (see Labbe 2014).

new advantageous proximity to the urban sphere as a means of improving their economies. Yet among such research on (peri-)urban villages and urban transformations, there has been less reflection about the impact of land use change on the subjective identities of affected peoples. As this chapter has elucidated, the unique experiences of craft development in Mễ Trì village shows that the process of rural to urban land use change in Hanoi has resulted in particular craft village identities whose subjects become heralded as the city's protectors of pre-urban heritage, morality and well-being. The identities of these village residents depend on their proactive maintenance of particular social imaginaries regarding agrarian culture as well as narratives of virtuous agrarian peoples. Mễ Trì producers' shift from producing rice to producing offers a solution to a crisis that was created by urbanization, in which the production and sales of the village product depend on the maintenance of an "agrarian spirit" but producers no longer have direct access rural land.

When viewed with an eye towards the broader experience of land use and social transformation in Hanoi, the case of Mễ Trì also suggests that such kinds of rural-urban identity formation are not just specific to craft villages, but also apply to a wider range of populations and urban actors who draw on iconic images of agriculture and agrarian people in trying to reposition themselves in the city's changing economy and society. Moreover, these urban village identities, having been co-produced by the villagers, *có*m's urban consumers, as well as state policymakers, also contribute to Mễ Trì's local economy, Hanoi's culinary traditions, and the city's urban master plans. Nevertheless, given that efforts to protect heritage and tradition remain oriented towards state-determined industrial goals, which support Hanoi's urban master plan, the issue of diminishing land remains omnipresent as a continuing source of tension between villagers and the state. The next chapter addresses such grievances, by focusing on the piecemeal character of land use transformation for such villagers. Local practices of using transformed village spaces to build

household economies show that *cóm* production in Mễ Trì has been fundamental to their village's recent experiences of land use change.

Images



Image 9: Mễ Trì's trademark printed on a poster describing the village's craft history hangs behind a framed certificate recognizing the village as "traditional craft village of Hanoi" at the 2018 Hanoi Culinary Fair



Image 10: Mễ Trì's trademark shows the hands of two cốm producers encircling a lotus pod.



Image 11: plump young rice grains used to make cốm.

Chapter Five- Resilient Agrarian Identities through the Long and Slow Land Transformation

5.1 Introduction:

In the early 2010s, a number of highly publicized cases of farmer-led protests against land dispossession for urban and industrial development in northern Vietnam prompted international media and academic interest in Vietnamese land use conflicts. Known as the "Tiên Lãng incident," the most widely-known case of a rural land-related insurgency occurred in early January of 2012 when fish farmer Đoàn Văn Vươn, after having lost a long legal battle to retain his 40 hectares of coastal swamp land, fired homemade weapons at an eviction squad of local officials and policemen coming to raze the area to construct an airport. In the aftermath of this outbreak, Vươn's property was demolished and he was sentenced to five years in prison for the attempted murder of authorities on duty.⁴⁴ The widespread media coverage of this event helped to turn Vươn into a national folk hero while also exposing the public to the wrongdoings of local administrators, who had illegally confiscated the farmer's land without compensation. In another highly publicized case, residents of Văn Giang district (about 50km from Hanoi Capital) engaged in a violent standoff with a troop of 3,000 security forces on the morning of April 24th, 2012 to resist land clearance. Văn Giang farmers threw Molotov cocktails at the approaching eviction team while the squad of policemen responded by beating the rebellious villagers (see Labbé 2015). Many residents resisted the remuneration offers from the developers, arguing that they did not receive correct compensation rates according to the market value of land. Despite unresolved disagreements over fair compensation, the farmers' bold resistance on that morning in April ended

⁴⁴ Vươn was granted special amnesty on Vietnam National Day in August of 2015, along with 18,539 inmates, (see Hieu 2015)

in defeat: developers managed to seize the 500 hectares of land from Văn Giang residents for the development of the luxurious “EcoPark” urban residential area.

Such contemporary cases of radical farmer-led insurgencies bring to mind the early 20th Century movements in Latin America and Southeast Asia (particularly in Vietnam) that inspired the seminal Cold War-era social theories on peasant revolutions (Wolf 1969; Scott 1976; Popkin 1979). While the present-day phenomena of rural land dispossession in Vietnam has prompted some high-profile incidences of unrest, conflicts over land use and ownership do not always lead to insurgent activities from dispossessed and displaced rural peoples. Non-violent and compliant forms of adaptation to land use change may actually be more common than dramatic events of peasant-led protests and resistance (Mamanova 2015). Like Tiên Lãng and Văn Giang, Mỹ Trì village underwent similar land use change in the late 1990s and early 2000s when villagers transferred growing land to government entities for building large public projects, such as the Láng Hoà Lạc Highway and the National Convention Center. However, despite having lost 194 hectares of land to urbanization between 2000 and 2006 due to these urban development initiatives, there have been few noteworthy public demonstrations in Mỹ Trì. Nonetheless, the apparent absence of open conflict over land use change in Mỹ Trì village does not mean that villagers fully accepted the terms of state land transfers without any hesitation. Mỹ Trì villagers responded to the changed conditions of their land and livelihoods with both optimism and anxiety towards the new urban demands and possibilities; as we have seen in the previous chapter, villagers carried such ambivalence into their emerging roles as Hanoi’s prized *cốm* producers.

Given the socialist state’s widespread suppression of political activism in Vietnam, particularly land rights activists, most Vietnamese citizens as well as foreign researchers (including

myself) tread cautiously around the topic of “land” in our daily conversations with local people.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, in Mễ Trì, grumblings about the loss of agricultural land always found their way into people’s explanations of the history and development of Mễ Trì’s *cốm*. Even in unstructured and impromptu interviews with *cốm* producing villagers, the topic of losing land often came up to explain people’s investments in boarding houses and *cốm* equipment, their transition from agriculture to non-agricultural livelihoods, and of course, their current sources of purchasing young rice grains for producing *cốm*. Yet, on one notable occasion, my casual inquisition with a Mễ Trì *cốm* producing household about their current land use situation led the couple to immediately become suspicious regarding the intent of my research on *cốm*. When this moment of discomfort and confusion occurred, my colleague at Hanoi’s University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Ngọc acted quickly to clarify the connection between our questions about land and them more central topic of *cốm* production; by doing so, she successfully demonstrated to the couple that it was merely a misunderstanding. Ngọc understood that the linkages she made between *cốm* and land would resonate with the sentiments and experiences of the *cốm* producing couple:

Mr. Huru: You are digressing from the topic [of *cốm*].

Ngọc: Yes, it is not that we are digressing. We are going to turn around [and talk about] *cốm* and how it is practiced, but if [we are talking about] *cốm* then you not only describe the trade of *cốm*, but [also how it is] connected to the current situation (modern changes). The trade of making *cốm* has seen some very big impacts, because of land, and changes in the prices of [land] on the market, right? In the past, you produced grains for *cốm* but now that there is no more land, then you have to buy it, you have to buy grains and so, clearly, land is one of the factors that contributes to the changes [in how you produce *cốm*].

Mr. Huru: That’s right. Whatever changes, we have to adjust [to it], for example, land here for making *cốm* is completely non-agricultural so, of course, we have to go to another area to order [grains]—for example, an area with a lot of rice fields. We go [to that area] to make agreements with the villagers, then during the growing season, we will go there and we

⁴⁵ Vietnam’s “land acquisitions” (*thu hồi đất đai*), like “human rights,” constitute a sensitive subject matter that calls into question the legitimacy of the country’s socialist state in protecting the well-being of its citizens. As such, it is a topic that is discussed with discretion.

will buy it and we will bring it here to do our trade. So there, we have to talk about it transparently in that way.

Mrs. Huru and Mrs. Huru (*both yelling passionately*): Nowadays, we have to go get rice grains from very far away! If we don't do this then no one will grow it for us and we cannot do our trade!

Like some villagers living in Mễ Trì Thượng hamlet, Mr. and Mrs. Huru still have a small parcel of agricultural land behind the aluminum barricades next to the Thăng Long Highway. However, since the couple began to commit their time and efforts on *cóm* production and renting out a boarding room as their main source of income, they have rented their remaining piece of land out to relatives who are only able to grow a few crops of regular rice and vegetables on the limited space. When the couple eventually lose the plot to developers, they told me that they will likely invest in more equipment to expand their *cóm* production workshop. As such conversations confirmed, and as this chapter will further explicate, the story of Mễ Trì's *cóm* has always been, simultaneously, a history of land use change. Moreover, this chapter will show that the process of land acquisition and urban development is not simply a confrontation between “land grabbers” and outraged peasant victims, but that it also involves interim forms of land use and cultivation, meaningful re-investments on existing village spaces, and personal exchanges of land between villagers.

I will argue here that what has occurred in Mễ Trì can be best understood as a process of multi-stakeholder *land use transformation* involving both intimate grassroots acts of adaptation to changing socio-material circumstances as well as macro processes of urbanization facilitated by state actors and, of course, capital resources. It represents a politics that comes “from below” (Borras and Franco 2013, 1724) as well as from *within* and of course, from the top as well—consisting of heterogenous, multiple and overlapping actors and alliances working towards diverse

objectives. Secondly, as a multi-layered process involving a manifold of differentiated actors, land use transformation manifests incrementally, in a manner that is not as stark and totalizing as imagined through the framework of accumulation by dispossession. As shown by Mẽ Tri villagers' experiences of struggle, adaptation and perseverance through their changing livelihoods and society, land use transformation is, for the most part, quiet, protracted and slow. Land does not simply transfer from farmers to the developers, but it is passed through the hands of multiple new users, and along the way, the land itself undergoes radical shifts in both its material shape and meaning. The dispossession, loss, and transfer of agricultural land from its previous rural owners transpires in a mostly piecemeal fashion and is only sometimes segmented by moments of radical accumulation.

Finally, tying the topic of land use transformation back to craft development, I will suggest that Mẽ Tri's recent experiences of land and social change exhibits a broader phenomenon of resilience. I consider Mẽ Tri's adaptation to shifting land formations as practices of resilience, given that such actions simultaneously enable state and private developers to take land, but also permit Mẽ Tri peoples to determine their own narratives identities and economies within the larger urban-oriented configurations. In essence, Mẽ Tri peoples' resilience demonstrates a kind of "moral economy" agreement (see Scott 1976) between the village and developers (both private and public), based on mutual recognition of Mẽ Tri's right to adapt to urban changes in ways that are self-determined—in other words, their right to be resilient. Thus, while villagers primarily respond to land use change in ways that are peaceful and slow, as this chapter will show (see Section 5.5), Mẽ Tri people feel so strongly about their right to be resilient that they may be compelled to engage in outright resistance when they feel that these rights have been violated.

In order to analyze the material and meaningful experiences of land transformation for Mẽ

Trì villagers and to connect this local case to my larger framework of resilience practices, I have organized this chapter as follows. The first section will point to a few of the major projects that have acquired rice growing land from Mễ Trì and show, through fieldwork narratives, some of the actions that villagers have taken to adjust to shrinking land resources. The second section will provide an overview of the prevailing literature on “land grabs” which perceive of cases such as Mễ Trì as instances of “accumulation by dispossession,” involving radical and violent confrontations between different land users. Here, I will introduce the concept of incremental land transformations to explain the shifting use and ownership of land in Mễ Trì village. I will pause briefly on peoples’ complaints and frustrations towards land use change to examine nuanced understandings of “rights” and “fairness.” The concluding section will then explore the rationales and consequences of resilience as a form of multi-stakeholder land use transformation.

5.2 The Meanings and Values of Land

Towards the end of Vietnam’s agricultural collectivization era, in approximately 1982, villagers who were of primary labor age (> 17 years of age) were allocated parcels of rice growing land from the village’s collective landholding. According to Mr. Hồng and Mrs. Hà, at the time, the villagers drew numbers to receive their plots of land, which were scattered in various locations throughout the agricultural landscape. Villagers identified their individual rice growing plots, which they call “*cánh đồng*” (field) or “*đất ruộng*” (rice growing land) based on local landmarks, such as “the orange garden” (*vườn cam*) or graveyard (*đồng mộ*, literally field of graves). They measured such plots using a Vietnamese measure called “*sào*,”⁴⁶ which in reality, were only

⁴⁶ One *sào* is approximately 360 square meters.

approximations of size, based more on the amount of rice that the area could yield than the dimensions of the land. As Youth Union Secretary Dung recalled from his childhood, older generation villagers like his parents and grandparents identified the family fields based on the shapes of the plots.

Emily: Fields everywhere look the same, right?

Dung: that's right. Every field looks the same; they all look alike. When there are no crops growing yet, then we could more easily recognize [our plots], but when there is rice growing, then all of them look the same. Sometimes people do not have the same size area of fields, so it is easier to recognize which is yours.

Assistant Interviewer Tâm: by the shape of it?

Dung: the shape could perhaps be a square, or a trapezoid, or a rectangle.

Mễ Trì villagers' previous measurements of their rice growing land began to radically shift during the onset of urban development. Starting around 1997, the Hanoi government annexed land in Mễ Trì for building the Láng Hoà Lạc Highway and later, in the early 2000s for the development of the Mỹ Đình Sports Complex. During this time period, villagers began to change their perspectives towards the value of their land. By the time the villagers signed land transfer agreements with government developers, their plots of land had gone from being roughly-measured plots of rice-yielding fields (*cánh đồng/ruộng*) into titled property with monetary values and precisely measured dimensions.

Anthropologist Erik Harms (2016a) found that the emergence of a market for buying and selling land use rights certificates in Vietnam has led victims of land dispossession to begin measuring their abstract sentiments of injustice as quantifiable land values, such that “property value—framed as a fair calculation of monetary value multiplied by square meters—comes to define the terms of justice” (ibid, 287). Harms notes that when victims of land dispossession began

to realize they had something to lose, they fought harder to hold onto it; however, they did this by essentially commoditizing their land such that “[the] calculus of commodity value came to play a leading role in the language of resistance they came to use” (Ibid 181). As Mễ Trì villagers became more informed about the market for land use rights in Hanoi, many villagers did not accept the terms of the compensation offered to them by state officials and developers, realizing that their land could be valued at higher market prices given its proximity to the city center. This meant that as land use change for urban development continued in Mễ Trì, the process of transferring land from villagers required more negotiations regarding the monetary value of the land. Many people endeavored to hold onto their land for as long as they could in the hopes of cashing in on a higher compensation price at a later date. As one villager explained, “the later we lose it, the more money it is. If we lose it right away, we don’t get much money— we’d easily have spent it all already.” In summary, the beginning of urban development in Mễ Trì marks the point during which time agricultural land effectively became commodified, as transferrable units of value, each holding a definite monetary price.

Contemporaneously, the process of land commodification involved other important shifts in how villagers perceive their changing agricultural land. This is because, when villagers signed the land transfer agreements, their land not only acquired a quantifiable and measurable monetary value, but the land’s materiality and meaning to Mễ Trì people also altered in the process. In Mễ Trì, people typically use “*cánh đồng*” and “*ruộng*” to refer to the agricultural landholdings that they held in the past; meanwhile, they call the remaining agricultural land near the village gate and alongside the Thăng Long highway as “*đất bỏ hoang*,” meaning fallow land but also, “wasteland.” The use of this term signifies that the land in question has already been annexed under the master plan; in other words, it is land with a project “*đất dự án*,” but developers have not yet begun

construction, so villagers can still use it for their own benefit. While they no longer perceive of their own land as agricultural, villagers now mostly use the terms “*cánh đồng*” and “*ruộng*” to refer to rice growing land in the provinces outside of Hanoi’s expanded city boundaries—the places where *cốm* producers retrieve their grains. Such shift in how villagers label different parts of their spatial compass demonstrates that the practice of agriculture has already been displaced outside of the village—onto non-Mễ Trì land.

Village plots are called fallow land because the original cultivators (for the most part) no longer till those plots, but have instead leased, or as they sometimes say, “loaned” it to other family members and neighbors use for various purposes.⁴⁷ Some continue to grow rice and morning glory on this land, depending on the size and topography of the plots, while others use it to raise goats, cows and pigs. A number of villagers have transformed roadside areas into weighing stations for passing semi-trucks, small storage facilities, and even soccer fields [see **Image 13**]. Describing these makeshift land uses, Bác Tùng from Mễ Trì Thượng explained that “People will leave [that land] and others use it [for various purposes], just as long as the land is kept.” These forms of land use, though mostly temporary and small-scale, have fundamentally changed the villagers’ relationship with their former rice growing land, as well as the qualities of the land itself. Thus, even while the overarching narrative of Mễ Trì’s loss of agricultural land to capital-driven urban development aligns with the framework of what many deem as a “land grab,” such a term may not give enough credit to the villagers for their part in the radical transformation of their land.

⁴⁷ Given that such land transfers happen through intimate personal relations, they often say, *cho mượn* (let them borrow) rather than “lease” land.

5.3 Gardening for Now

In the next two sections, I pause to focus briefly on two ways in which I observed Mễ Trì people to use and transform village land and space, which they did in order to contribute to their family's well-being and future financial security. The first is makeshift gardening and temporary cultivation, and the second is boarding house construction. My objective in highlighting such activities is to suggest that Mễ Trì villagers' diverse responses to losing their rice growing land to urban development was not as overtly revolutionary or even "politically-charged" as social theorists and media may have expected. Although the villagers sometimes groaned about meager land compensation rates or corrupt officials who have supposedly squandered their land, their actions did not reflect such frustrations. What's more, while media reports on high profile cases such as Tiên Lãng and Văn Giang may leave readers anticipating that other incidents of urban development will demolish agriculture and leave former land users in economic despair, Mễ Trì's experience of losing their land was neither dramatic nor bleak. Instead, the loss of their land has been a slow, quiet, and piecemeal process, involving agriculture, *cốm* production, as well as other forms of spatial-social transformations.

In the Fall of 2017, there were still a number of places where Mễ Trì villagers were still growing crops: alongside the Thăng Long highway in Mễ Trì Thượng hamlet; in the space across from the Ward's People's Committee office; and behind the new apartment buildings between Phạm Hùng Street and the western village gateway of Mễ Trì Hạ. Consisting of both rice fields (in the Thăng Long highway area) and small vegetable gardens, such places were inconspicuous because they were typically hidden behind green aluminum fences. The city had erected such fences to mark out upcoming project areas, and secondly, to keep the space looking "clean" (*sạch*) and "ordered" (*trật tự*) to those passing by. The scene behind the fences was a stark contrast to the

busy traffic, cement roads, and glass-windowed skyscrapers on the other side. Inside the aluminum walls, villagers, mostly women above 50 years of age, could be found crouching over their rice crops or quietly tending to their plants and bushes. In the gardens near the People's Committee building and the village gateway, villagers put up small gates made of sticks, wood, blue tarp, and plastic bags to separate the individual plots. They also made pathways between the different field areas out of dirt, cardboard and old mattresses so that the women could easily cross into their plots to water their plants [see **Image 12**]. In the more spacious piece of land that remained by the highway, villagers still retained an irrigation system that allowed them to grow seasonal rice.

Nearly all of the land that is currently being used by villagers for seasonal rice production and temporary gardening is officially allocated for other uses under a master plan, which means that the land has been legally transferred to new users and the former users have (mostly) been compensated. Nevertheless, due to lack of funds and changing project owners, a large number of projects have not yet commenced, leaving the land available to be used by villagers. Those with land in these areas still regard the plots as theirs to use and loan to others until the day that the project managers return to reclaim the land. Mrs. Huru from Mễ Trì Thượng explained to me that the rice fields out near the Thăng Long Highway are already annexed for an upcoming government project, but villagers simply “borrow” (*mượn*) the land:

Mrs. Huru: when the government has not yet touched upon it, then we village households can make use of it. We can still use it to grow rice [and other things]. Whenever [the government] uses it, then we will go out there less. You have to understand that [...] They have already paid us money, but they have not yet used [the land], so we just temporarily borrow land from them and use it. Whenever they ask for it [back], then we return it.

As Mrs. Huru noted, villagers accept that their current makeshift land use patterns on project land (*đất dự án*) are only temporary and they are ready to hand the land over to its new users when the time comes. One villager told me, half-jokingly, “if the government takes it, then we have to return

it to the government. How would we be able to resist the government?”

However, what remained unclear from my conversations with villagers was the legality of temporary cultivation on project land. My fieldwork assistant, Tâm had commented during our first visit to the gardens outside of the People’s Committee that the gardens do “not look legal.” The plastic bag-and-stick gates and cardboard-mattress-walkways certainly clashed with the aesthetics of glass and concrete on the other side of the aluminum fence, making them feel as if they were stealthy and illicit operations. Such an understanding of illegality represents what Asher Ghertner (2015) calls “rule by aesthetics,” a mode of urban governance that uses aesthetic preferences for commercially planned (“world-class”) infrastructures as a standard for determining the legality of a particular urban formation. According to this framework, “if a development project looks “world-class,” then it is most often declared planned; if a settlement looks polluting, it is sanctioned as unplanned and illegal” (Ghertner 2011 280). A similar type of rule by aesthetic is embedded in Vietnam’s urban development discourse, as represented by the concept of “urban civility” (*văn minh đô thị*). Urban civility (see Harms 2009), which depends on the reproduction of rural-urban categories of difference in a spectrum on civilization and progress,⁴⁸ favors urban master plans and policies while regarding other local practices of using land and space as “informal” and therefore “illegal.”

The logic of urban civility would consider makeshift gardens and temporary rice fields in Mễ Trì as illegal forms of land use. Nevertheless, given that most of the rice growers and gardeners in Mễ Trì mentioned that they pay taxes to an agricultural cooperative (*hợp tác xã nông nghiệp*) to receive water and “security services” for their plots, such activities appear to be formally accepted by local officials. Yet, such tax agreements may also be the result of interpersonal relations and

⁴⁸ which places peasants living in the countryside on the least civilized end and elite urban intellectual at the highest end of civility.

individual benefits rather than formal legal systems. For example, local officials at the agricultural cooperative may be sympathetic to their relatives and community members, or they may even permit such activities given that cooperative leaders can benefit monetarily from continued cultivation. Local level accommodations to top-down policies complicate notions of legality and illegality while also revealing, in some ways, Vietnam's post-reform methods of governance. MacLean (2010) asserts that Vietnam is a government of mistrust and flexibility, in which state practices accommodate formal procedures to local frameworks of meaning. He writes:

policies formulated in Hanoi often had relatively little to do with how low-level officials and villagers implemented them; yet they were not totally divorced from one another. Consequently, living conditions in rural areas were neither fully legible...nor fully illegible to high level officials. Instead they were somewhere in between [...] (MacLean 2010 xii-xiii).

MacLean's point is important to our understanding of Mễ Trì's continued use of project land because it suggests that such actions do not need to be legal according to Hanoi's formal policies in order to be permissible in the local context. However, if such activities are indeed illegal, they are also highly susceptible to dismantlement depending on how district and city-level officials perceive of the remaining gardens and rice fields at any given time—a situation of unpredictability and precarity particular to Vietnamese post-reform governance, which Gainsborough (2010) calls “uncertainty as an instrument of rule.”

Given the precarious and momentary nature of such activities, villagers who continue to grow rice or vegetables are not motivated by the monetary benefits of cultivation. Instead, they produce small amounts of rice and vegetable crops based on certain personal convictions. Many people, including those who no longer farm, explained that after they had signed the land transfer agreements, they proceeded to cultivate while waiting for the projects to commence out of their feeling of “regret” (*tiếc*) when looking at the unused patches of rice fields. This regret comes from

a deep-rooted and natural inclination to not be “wasteful” (*lãng phí*) with land, particularly given their history of enduring hunger and poverty through the earlier collective era. “We feel regretful” one Mễ Trì Thượng rice farmer explained to me, “so we just go out and grow rice there temporarily, and whenever they need to use it, they will come out and dig it up [and] we will just return it to them.” When I pointed out to Youth Union Secretary Dung’s aunt, Thím that I mostly saw elderly women (*bà cụ*) out on the fields and gardens in Mễ Trì, she told me, “old women have nothing to do. In general, they would rather work a little bit than give up [the land]. They regret it because [on the fields] they can still work to earn a bit.”

As Thím suggested, these women continue to farm in Mễ Trì because they have “nothing to do” in the changed village household economy. While in the past, older women may have found ways to contribute to their family’s income through farming, those who have not been able to work (or who have rejected the low-level positions) in non-agricultural sectors find themselves feeling bored or restless. Youth Union Secretary Dung explained that many elderly women farm both out of habit and in order to resist being a burden to their families:

Dung: People here do not like resting, they just like working [...] They are not from families that are in [economic] hardship, but they like to do it, even though they are very weak (fragile), they still like doing it—that is what is fascinating about it. In their psychology, they are used to working, secondly, they do not want to stay home and be a burden to their children; they do not have the habit of mooching (*ăn bám*) or anything [...] The men will rest—they will go play, but the women are always growing vegetables.

One rice farmer in Mễ Trì Thượng recounted to me that, whenever her sons and daughters suggest that she should quit working and stay at home with the grandchildren, she tells them, “working in the field gives us rice to eat; it is better than staying at home looking after the children.” Such women hold onto traditional understandings about family roles and the value of agricultural labor in their search for a purpose for themselves in the shifting household economy that now favors

monetary incomes. “Earning money is not easy,” another rice farmer told me, whose children’s office wages pay for the bulk of the living expenses, “I am growing rice so I can provide them with rice; working is also a part of helping my children.”

But it was not just elderly women who felt the need to farm as a way of supporting their families; many others, including middle-aged men and women, continued to cultivate out of anxiety over the quality of agricultural products found in the marketplace. Believing that produce in Hanoi’s markets are unsafe to eat because they are either “fake” imports from China (see Vann 2006), or else covered in chemical fertilizers and pesticides, many of the temporary gardeners and rice growers in Mễ Trì suggested that by farming, at least they can provide their family with “clean products” (see for example, Kurfurst 2017). Below, Mrs. Mỹ, whom I met on the ledge of her rice field in Mễ Trì Thượng described such intentions for farming while she waits for the project construction to reclaim the land:

Mrs. Mỹ: I grow crops to have clean rice to eat because 90% of rice at the store contains mold-proof and moisture-proof chemicals.

Emily: Do you grow vegetables?

Mrs. Mỹ: Yes, because it’s cleaner to grow them yourself.

Emily: Do you plant any for sale?

Mrs. Mỹ: Yes, of course. I can’t eat them all. My neighbors know they are clean vegetables, so they also want to buy them.

Emily: But are you planning to stay here until they take away your land?

Mrs. Mỹ: I’ll keep on growing crops until they take all of my lands away because I’m scared of the chemical substances in food. When I can’t produce vegetables, I have to buy them from the market, and their quality is below my standard.

However, despite peoples’ intentions of growing clean food, the conditions of farming in the urban setting do not necessarily guarantee that their products are clean. Except for out near the

Thăng Long highway, Mễ Trì no longer has an irrigation system for agriculture, the farmers share the sewage system with the surrounding urban constructions, and moreover, they must deal with rats coming from the nearby buildings. When asked if he eats locally grown vegetables from Mễ Trì, Youth Union Secretary Dung responded, “actually, those vegetables are not necessarily clean, because of the water that they use.” My assistant Tâm and I nodded in unison, recalling the state of the water we had seen out in the Mễ Trì Hạ garden plots, “the water there was dirty,” Tâm said. Dung laughed, “Yes, it’s black, right?”

Even though continued farming did not necessarily contribute to the healthy diets of Mễ Trì villagers, it had other important implications for both the villagers and the project developers. By continuing to cultivate on the land while waiting for construction to commence, which can often take years due to insufficient funds and other bureaucratic hiccups, these villagers also sometimes stalled the processes of eviction and land use change. Below, Youth Union Secretary Dung’s aunt, Thím explained that after she signed land transfer agreements, she carried on farming and the developers waited for her to finish before taking further steps:

In the regulations, they said that they would take the field immediately (*on paper*), but they wouldn't use it for one year. When they came for the construction and saw that rice was about to be ready for harvesting, they chose another area that was uncultivated to work on first. They waited for about a week, 10 days or half a month so I could finish harvesting. Unless their [project] was very urgent, they would let me adapt [to the land transfer] (*by allowing her to continue farming for the year and then finish harvesting*). In general, both sides (*the government and the developers*) let me adapt and earn [a bit from the land] because they didn't lose anything [in the process] and I didn't lose anything either. They didn't want to waste [the land and crops] so they let me harvest first.

In other words, by proceeding to farm on the land that they have already transferred to new users, Mễ Trì villagers are also able to negotiate with the temporality and method through which their land is acquired. Such negotiations ultimately make the process of land use change much slower,

protracted, and amiable than how it is typically portrayed by the dominant media and scholarship on rural land grabs.

5.3. Boarding Houses for the Future

As I discussed in previous chapters, boarding rooms and rental house development have proliferated in Mễ Trì in the past two decades, narrowing the village's already small pathways, and filling them with constant noise and dust from the construction (see also Bousquet 2016). After losing their farmland, most villagers used the compensation money to rebuild their homes into taller units. Whatever floors and spaces that immediate family members did not use, the villagers transformed into boarding rooms and houses for migrant villagers and students to rent. In the process of re-investing their compensation money from losing agricultural land into tube houses (*nhà ống*⁴⁹) and boarding rooms on the residential land, the villagers have radically transformed the spaces within which they live. Many people remember the village homes to be “class 4 houses” (“*nhà cấp 4*”), an official government classification referring to simple ground-level, rectangular homes, sometimes made of cement and sometimes, if they are preserved from earlier eras, they are made of wood with clay-tile roofs. Such houses even contained small gardens and courtyards where chickens run freely while villagers sit in the shade, sharing tea with neighbors. However, these days, the expansion of tube homes and apartment buildings means that the sky is barely visible from the pathways of Mễ Trì village. The aesthetic drawbacks of boarding house construction were the price that villagers paid for building a material foundation to support their future generations.

⁴⁹ See Footnote 5 in Chapter 1 for explanation of “tube houses.”

Landlordism is such a prevalent occupation in Mễ Trì that villagers often joke that the whole village would “die of starvation” without the migrant tenants. Regardless of their complaints about the cramped alleyways, the noise of motorbikes, and the changed social atmosphere of everyday village life, most Mễ Trì people agree that the boarding houses and rooms have brought important benefits. Aging farmers no longer need to perform “miserable” kinds of labor (*lao động khó*, also called strenuous work, or *việc vất vả*), but they can support their families with \$1,000- 2,000 USD, or even up to \$4,000 USD a month from renting out boarding rooms. Since Mễ Trì is well connected to the city center and the nearby universities in Cầu Giấy district, it has become a popular rental area for young people; most landlords noted that their boarding rooms are completely occupied year-round.⁵⁰ Despite the density of the village space, Mễ Trì people are continuing to build more apartments and boarding houses, by cutting out even smaller corners and interstices of their home areas. Hùng Nhỏ, whose family rents out two boarding homes in Mễ Trì Hạ explained to me the circular process of making value out of small spaces:

These empty spaces—these gardens [and yards]—don’t add much to the [household] economy. [But] if people [in the village] follow the [capitalist] economy, then they build up a house to rent out to others. The remaining area that is left for us to live on is smaller and the number of tall buildings that are built grow even higher in order to support the family.

Important to Hùng Nhỏ’s explanation is that the boarding houses are necessary for most villagers to participate in the “capitalist” economy. What Hùng Nhỏ suggests, and what I will return to shortly, is that landless villagers need such rental spaces because it is not only a steady source of

⁵⁰ Yet, not all villagers were equally capable of becoming landlords; those (e.g., Bắc Tùng) whose residential lands were small to begin with, and those who had lost agricultural land in the early years when compensation was at its lowest, did not have the money or land to invest in rental properties. Many of the less-fortunate villagers became *côm* producers and various sorts of entrepreneurs and retailers “*đi chợ*” to earn extra income.

income, but it is also private property that insures them against future market vulnerabilities.

While Vietnam's system of land use rights certifications (LURC) precludes land ownership, Vietnam's Constitution allows individuals to own homes and buildings that sit on top of the land itself; on official paperwork, it is the difference between the red dossier (*sổ đỏ*) and pink dossier (*sổ hồng*) (Harms 2012b, 432). Because of these land tenure policy distinctions, many villagers with similar experiences of losing land as Mễ Trì have seized on the growing demand for migrant housing because homebuilding in the city's outskirts involves high returns with relatively cheap input costs.⁵¹ What's more, this once peri-urban zone around Hanoi has historically represented a "grey"⁵² zone that state officials approached with flexible and partial regulations, which thereby enabled and sometimes encouraged villagers to engage in informal and illegal (economic and home/village construction) practices⁵³ (Labbé 2014). As a result of the state's limited attention, those living in such zones were able to evade expensive permit applications and official registrations required of urban residential construction (Leaf 1999; Labbé 2014; Bousquet 2016). Michael Leaf notes that, "at least 70 per cent and perhaps as much as 90 per cent of all new construction in the city is now

⁵¹ A similar situation occurs in Guangzhou, China, where rural residents have transformed into "Maoist landlords" due to post-socialist urban development (Siu 2007).

⁵² Bringing together Aiwha Ong's theory on post-socialist governance (2006) and Oren Yiftachel's urban planning framework on "gray spacing" (2009), Danielle Labbé (2014) argues that peri-urban regions represent "zones of exception" and "grey spaces" where officials make certain adjustments and exceptions to state policies in order to preserve the economic function of the peri-urban zone and to maintain their own legitimacy as socialist authorities, which depends on the officials' interpersonal obligations with villagers. Labbé writes, "zones of exception and grey spaces serve to explain how, despite being fragmented, penetrated by private interests, in competition with other sources of power, the state remains pivotal in shaping the periurbanization process in Ha Noi" (Labbé 2014, 19).

⁵³ Labbé has also shown in her ethnographic work that, due to housing shortages in the 1990s, Hanoi's post-reform urban development strategies commissioned peri-urban households to engage in urban housing redevelopment, through an official policy known as "State and People Work Together" (*nhà nước và nhân dân cùng làm*) (Labbé 2014, 103).

undertaken without formal permits, and in most cases, without even a proper authorization of land use rights” (Leaf 2002, 305).

The forms of development that take place in Mễ Trì, as well as in a multitude of other cities in Vietnam, are what urban scholars often refer to as “*in situ*” urbanization. *In situ* urbanization comprises of local and endogenous practices of land use change that have the effect of transforming rural villages into ostensibly and functionally urban spaces. While not accounted for in formal urban planning strategies, these in situ, “informal” practices of land use change have profound impacts on urban master plans. Below, Minh, an urban planner and professor at Hanoi Architectural University described village land use practices as a process of “mincing” (*băm nát*) land into tiny pieces, which—rather than being informal—is actually encouraged by urban policies for renovating village spaces:

there is always a saying that is written in laws for village areas which is “renovation and embellishment” (*cải tạo và chỉnh trang*). The meaning of this is that you make an area better, but the policy on land is also that everyone is given permission to divide the land into smaller pieces. [...] I will say that, according to my research, ***all of this makes the area of the village become minced (băm nát) into tiny pieces.*** When it is minced up like this, residential density follows, and when you have already minced it up like this then you don’t have any land [left] for anything [...] then all of a sudden, it will make the price of land go up. People divide up land into 30m² pieces and each square meter sells, along with the house, for about 1 billion VND. [...] This is a policy that I think has ruined a lot of things with regards to the urban form.

In Minh’s opinion, the broader disadvantage of village in situ urbanization is the impact it has on property values. As he suggests, property values are not just the result of market dynamics and top-down urban policies, but villagers also play an important role in driving up the property values in such areas—which they have done by “mincing” land. Nevertheless, what Minh points out is that urban policies that encourage “renovation and embellishment” without also placing appropriate size restrictions on land use prompted villagers to dice up their land into the smallest

pieces possible. In other words, the villagers divided up their land into smaller and smaller pieces in order to make the most out of their situation.⁵⁴

Because of the growing value of land in Mễ Trì, villagers continue to invest in building rental properties in their cramped residential spaces as a way of creating forms of inheritance for future generations. Given that villagers no longer have agricultural land to pass on to their children, inheritance now takes the form of money and residential properties. “If there is no land, they will divide by cash. Everything that the parents have, whatever is left, the parents will divide up for the children,” Hùng Nhỏ told me. Many Mễ Trì people explained to me that they had both immediate and long-term objectives for building rental units: firstly, boarding houses helped balance out rising the costs of living in Hanoi by providing them with a steady and reliable monthly income; secondly, they intended to pass on boarding houses as a form of financial cushion in the event that their children have financial troubles or problems finding jobs. Both of these goals are strategies that not only enable villagers to better integrate and sustain themselves in the market economy, but they are also protective measures that safeguard village households from vulnerabilities specific to capitalism—for example, lack of employment, bankruptcy, and social insecurity, among others.

Given Vietnam’s post-Đổi Mới market for land use right certificates (LURC), which is restricted by state land ownership, the prevalence of landlordism in Vietnam’s urban context is one method of establishing private property. Moreover, it may be a way for individuals and households to secure judiciary rights to be the exclusive beneficiaries of their remaining land. As I referred to previously, in Harms’ 2016 ethnography on land dispossession and urban development in Hồ Chí Minh City, he shows that “land use rights [certificates] have not only encouraged people to believe

⁵⁴ Minh told me that if he were to improve urban development policies in Hanoi, he would limit the size of land divisions to 80 m². In his opinion, land use restrictions set at 80 m² will stabilize property values in Hanoi while also mitigating problems of urban density.

that they have something called rights worth fighting for, but they have also enabled a rapacious Vietnamese land market to emerge in ways that have threatened those rights at every turn" (Harms 2016a, 7). His study demonstrates that "rights"—to *use* land—are fundamentally forms of exclusion given that they are unequally distributed in society: "like parcels of land [,] some people have more rights than others" (Ibid, 214). Land use rights reproduce and reinforce already existing social inequalities, giving certain people the ability to assert their proprietary rights to exclude and evict others from land while, at the same time, forcing others to fight for rights that they do not possess (Ibid, 221). He writes:

the generalizable notion of rights currently emerging in Vietnam is actually intertwined with and inseparable from property rights. The rights that so many people are agitating for are in fact little more than the right to maximize land values in a superheated real estate market where fortunes and livelihoods can be made through land transactions (ibid 220).

LURC dossiers and their carefully measured size dimensions make land use rights legible on paper, but the actual construction of buildings draws the tangible boundaries of a land user's exclusive entitlement to benefit from the land. Home and rental construction thus emerge as an interesting element and contingency factor within such entangled processes of dispossession and exclusion based on land *use* rights. The process of constructing buildings on top of land appears to visibly establish one's legal private access to the land, which would supposedly allow village landlords to actively exclude other actors from accessing the space—whether it be other state and non-state others. My observation regarding peoples' motivations for constructing boarding houses as a method of assuring legal protections from use and dispossession by others requires further ethnographic exploration of wide range of cases in Vietnam, beyond Mễ Trì. Nonetheless, the primary point of this section's analysis on Mễ Trì's boarding houses is to suggest that by adapting to Vietnam's shifting social and material conditions of urban economic change, villagers actively

participated in the transformation of village land. In other words, they were not merely victims of new capital-driven land use patterns, but they were also important agents behind this change.

5.4 Land Use Transformation

Mẽ Trì's *cóm* production, makeshift gardens, and boarding houses stand out as key adaptation practices that villagers undertook in response to the loss of their rice growing land to urban development. As shown by such practices, the loss of village land did not involve overt conflict, nor did it happen suddenly—through a maelstrom of government-ordered obliterations to their rice fields and homes. Rather, the land use changes that took place in Mẽ Trì also came about through actions that the villagers brought about themselves, as part of their own process of self-transformation and adjustment to new socioeconomic circumstances. With this in mind, the question still remains of how to situate Mẽ Trì's experiences of losing their land in the context of the proliferating land acquisitions and land use conversions happening both domestically and around the globe. What might the case of Mẽ Trì's self-transformation say about the broader process of urbanization and the cultural politics of land use in places undergoing land conversion—from agricultural to non-agricultural purposes? What kind of frameworks might help us to account for the active participation of grassroots actors in the processes of land dispossession and urban development? A review of the literature on land deals and disputes will lead me to propose that Mẽ Trì's protracted land transfer and conversion demonstrates what I call an incremental *land use transformation*, involving the actions of multiple stakeholders whose individual and collaborative actions work to alter the materiality, value, and function of a space in radical ways.

To begin, even though Mẽ Trì's experience of losing their farmland does not follow the typical narrative of media and scholarly reports on land-related protests and rebellions in Vietnam

(and elsewhere), it remains connected to the plethora of land deals and conflicts that are occurring across the world. Capital is a common denominator between globally occurring incidences of land acquisition for urban and industrial development, and its impact on Mễ Trì's landscape is certain. In Vietnam, the 1993 introduction of the Land Law transformed land into a commodity to be exchanged in the global market economy such that foreign financiers can now make speculative investments in Vietnamese land. This commodification of land facilitated processes of land use change for urban-oriented commercial development in places, such as Mễ Trì, by transforming land into an important financial resource for real estate developers (Searle 2015 explains a similar phenomenon occurring in India). New research attending to the role of capitalism in contemporary events of land control and exclusion now often subsume individual cases like these under the general notion of "global land grab." When scholars employ "land grabs" and "global land grabs" interchangeably or simultaneously, they support the assumption that land transfers happening locally somewhere (*anywhere*) are mere articulations of a larger and overarching phenomenon, namely the expansion of capitalism. Such scholarship confirms what neo-Marxist geographer David Harvey (2003) famously describes as "accumulation by dispossession," a process of continued commodification of both public and private wealth that dispossesses previous owners of their assets and means of production, namely land. Yet, as Levien (2011) has suggested, ideas concerning accumulation by dispossession as a "generic response[s] to the crisis of overaccumulation in the global economy" make it difficult to evaluate how various instances of land use change and dispossession emerge in different contexts (32; de las Mercedes Donato Biocca 2015). Consequently, such frameworks do not give sufficient weight to the larger material and social implications of peoples' individual land use actions, such as the gardening and homebuilding of Mễ Trì

villager.

With its focus on the operations and effects of (advanced) capitalism, the concept of “global land grabs” tends to assume that land dispossession and urban development is always a top-down action involving exogenous actors or—at the very least—foreign direct investments (Fairbairn 2013). This top-down approach to land-grabs obscures the actions of individual land users, local government officials and various other primary players and middlemen— all of whom participate in the process of land use change. As Tania Li (2014) has shown in her research on cacao planters in the Central Sulawesi highlands, smallholding agriculturalists can sometimes act as both the drivers and victims of land grabs. In Li’s work, she also suggests that personal aspirations, desires and values are as important—perhaps even more important— in facilitating land grabs as the market logic of profit maximization.

Applying such insights to Mẽ Tri, we have also seen that peoples’ personal desires to leave arduous agricultural labor and to create new material sources of security for future generations have been integral to villagers’ land use decisions—for example, leaving their land fallow and reinvesting land compensation into transforming other village spaces. Rather than reverse the loss of their agricultural land to urban development, these latter village actions actually enable urban processes to proceed. Evidence of local-level forms of land use conversion, which Li et. al call “intimate exclusions,”⁵⁵ suggests that villagers are complicit in the social and material changes that take place in Mẽ Tri. By viewing grassroots actors as participants rather than land grab victims, we can therefore account for a wide array of actions

⁵⁵ Tania Li and her collaborators, including Derek Hall as well as Phillip Hirsch, call the process of grassroots, local-level land use conversion as “intimate exclusions” — rather than capital-driven land grabs or dispossession (Hall et al. 2011). As I noted in the previous section, Mẽ Tri’s home and rental constructions appear to be one “intimate” method through which villagers exclude others (including each other) from accessing their land.

involved in land dispossession that go beyond the overt reactionary measures that many predict to emerge in response to the experience of losing land. In Mễ Trì village, villagers did not respond to the loss of their agricultural land with protests or violent resistance. Nevertheless, their decisions to adapt to changing material conditions through gardening, *cóm* production, and rental construction are still political in their own right. Such actions enabled villagers to negotiate with the terms of dispossession and change, by allowing them to slow down the process of land use conversion, retain a certain self-prescribed agrarian identity, and to gain a means of economic security (and sometimes, even wealth) without agricultural land.

Saturnino Borrás and Jennifer Franco (2013) called for greater attention to political reactions “from below” to overcome social science scholarship’s propensity to assume both the causes of agrarian conflict (“land grabs”) and the responses of those who are affected (insurgency, everyday resistance, rightful resistance, etc....) (1724). They argue that internal differentiations between and across communities lead people to experience and interpret land dispossession and land use change in uneven and dissimilar ways. A politics “from below”—and I would argue, importantly, “from within” as well—not only asks why certain political actions and non-actions occur, but it also gives greater consideration to the subject of discontent (the thing that is to be “resisted”) (Caoutte and Turner 2009, 271). For example, as I have described in previous chapters, many villagers in Mễ Trì do not resist the loss of their agricultural land *per se*, but rather the constrictions of wage-based labor in the urban economy. As a result, they find opportunities to make use of available land in ways that push back against municipal strategies for building spaces of urban civility, as well as state plans for transforming farmers into industrial wage workers. Borrás and Franco’s multi-scale approach to the analysis of land politics provides room for examining how urban development and

agricultural land loss intersect with particular kinds of identity politics.

Not only is the pervasive framework of “global land grabs” unable to capture the multi-scale factors that contribute to individual cases of land use change, but it also overlooks the particular temporal, social, and material dynamics through which land dispossession and change occurs. Analyses about global land grabs or “accumulation by dispossession” tend to suggest that such processes are always immediate, radical and totalizing in nature. Sociologist Michael Levien (2013) describes land dispossession in his ethnographic field site of India as a “massive and sudden,” one-time expropriation of the means of production and subsistence from peasants, which he argues is why “perhaps why [land] enclosures have historically generated some of the most explosive peasant rebellions (Levien 2013, 362). Nevertheless, even while there is plenty of media evidence that land dispossession manifests suddenly and violently in many areas of the world, in those same places, land transfers occur in a mostly gradual and piecemeal fashion (Benjaminsen and Bryceson 2012). Tania Li’s idea of “piecemeal dispossessions” (2011) better captures Mễ Tri’s slow and incremental experiences of land use changes. In Mễ Tri, for the most part, rice growing land passes slowly and quietly through the hands of different villagers on its way to becoming the home for new five-star hotels and shopping malls. “Urbanization does not take it all at once!” Mr. Hông and Mrs. Hà told me. As Cô Liên from 39 Hàng Than also explained to me, “land was just lost gradually. It is just [lost] when the project developers come to take it, to build all the houses and all the villas to rent out.” In other words, villagers are not truly dispossessed of their land until the construction workers come in. Moreover, since government officials and private developers also pass on whole blocks or fragments of their project land to other private companies and organizations, these internal negotiations also delay the process of urban construction on Mễ Tri’s former rice growing land. The parceling of Mễ Tri’s land to

multiple private users further segments the land into smaller projects, each with differing start dates. This gives villagers the ability to continue using certain parcels even when urban construction has commenced in the surrounding space. Nonetheless, in Mễ Trì, these more incremental processes of land use changes can be segmented by moments of abrupt and coercive land clearance resembling Harvey's accumulation by dispossession, which are often prompted by the self-interest of local officials. However, after such incidences happen and the villagers have been compensated for their lost land, the once indignant victims of land dispossession will find ways to adapt to their new material conditions and the slow and gradual process of land use change resumes.

Rather than “land grab,” I propose to call Mễ Trì's a process of multi-stakeholder *land use transformation*, shaped by capital forces, national political economic strategies, interpersonal collusions, as well as local-level practices of adaptation. The language of transformation accounts for the synergies and simultaneity of the various forces that contribute to socio-material change in a particular place. It allows us to capture peoples' complex experiences with agricultural land loss, from the process of transferring land and adapting to new material circumstances, to the continued uses of remaining patches, which correspond to peoples' shifting stances and values towards their former rice growing land. The framework of land use transformation attends to the plethora of values—both capitalist and non-capitalist— that determine how land is being used in particular places. Importantly, the transformation perspective rejects concepts of urban determinism and urban teleology; instead, it conceives of space and society as eternally dynamic. By centering the subject of analysis on the processes and practices of change, the idea of land use transformation “reaches beyond dichotomies and discontinuities to issues of interrelationships and continuities

[...which would also] assess when, to what degree, and under what circumstances a rural-urban understanding is appropriate” (Koppel 1991; 53).

The transformation perspective acknowledges that land use change can sometimes be sudden and momentous, but it is most often slow, quiet, and gradual. When situating the case of Mễ Trì in the larger national as well as global phenomenon of land transformation, we can see that land use change, as whole, largely consists of such incremental processes of borrowing and lending land, waiting around for construction to commence⁵⁶, and adaptation to new circumstances, punctuated by moments of radical accumulation by dispossession through the hands of corrupt government leaders. When these more radical forms of accumulation occur, they have the power to ignite outrage and even resistance among villagers, but not for the reasons that we may assume. The next section explores some of the incidences of conflict within Mễ Trì village and the reasons for villagers’ discontent. In the final section of this chapter, I conclude that these moments of rupture within the longer and more protracted process of land use transformation provide an insight into what I call a “politics of resilience”—a moral economy that is defined by the villagers’ right to self-determined adaptation and resilience to change.

5.5. There was conflict

In arguing that Mễ Trì were active participants in the incremental transformation of their agricultural land, I do not suggest that the process was absent of any conflict or discontent. Villagers held ambivalent feelings towards the loss of their land and the arrival of new urban

⁵⁶ Harms 2016a also describes this as a tactic that people use to press for more favorable compensation (181).

developments. They were not resentful about losing farmland, and oftentimes, even happy about the opportunity to leave agriculture; but at the same time, many perceived that the costs of urbanization (*đô thị hoá*) did not exceed the benefits to the villagers. “What benefit is there?” Mrs. Huru retorted when I asked her opinion about the benefits of urban development, “Sometimes it brings even more noise [...] And after that, there is also the traffic, the trash discarded in disarray, [...] our electricity is much weaker—[sometimes] we have even lost electricity.” Moreover, Mễ Trì villagers expressed widespread frustration towards the process through which they had lost their land, which further compounded their feelings of ambivalence regarding the costs and benefits of urban land use conversion.

When construction for the Thăng Long highway took place in Mễ Trì around 1997, many people noted that villagers received no compensation for the land that they lost to the project. “We didn’t get a single dollar,” Mrs. Hà told me. Mr. Hồng explained further that at the time, government developers did not draw on existing compensation laws because villagers were not aware of such legal stipulations:

Mr. Hồng: During that time there was certainly a law. They did it with us villagers here, they disguised it (*the fact that there was a law*). The villagers here didn’t understand the laws, do you understand? During the first year, it was the third belt (highway) [...] they took [land there] and did not give any compensation. Then afterwards, during the next project, they began to have laws for compensation. Then we got money, but we only got a little bit.

In later projects, such as the National Convention Center, villagers reportedly received 36 million VND (~\$1,500 USD) per *sào* (or 360m²) of land, which they now find to be meager, particularly given that their land is currently priced at around 600-800 million VND per *sào* (~\$26,000 to \$35,000 USD). During these early days of development, villagers were uninformed about the possibility to negotiate a higher compensation rate for their land according to market prices. Mr. Khoa suggested that in the beginning, the compensations they were offered seemed already high

for farmers:

Mr. Khoa: The intellectual standard was low, so people didn't care much. After a meeting, it was said that the government would retrieve the land with the price of 30 million per *sào*. The villagers were poor, they heard that they were going to get money—never in their life they had 30 million in their pockets! So, they were excited and supported the project. But now the people are different, they will take it in to consideration before agreeing, and the projects now are different too.

These days, decisions about land compensation are made at town-hall meetings that involve negotiations between affected villagers and developers. Nevertheless, the bulk of Mễ Trì's farmland has already been transferred without such comprehensive negotiations. As Mrs. Hà explained, "Villagers here, in general, are honest [people], they didn't know [in the past]. Afterwards, they saw [the possibilities to negotiate] and when they started to recognize it, then the land was almost all gone." According to villagers, developers are legally unable to initiate a land transfer until villagers agree on a compensation rate. This was particularly true when the developers were private companies; however, villagers were more hesitant about making concessions with government developers. "For example, the government project in the convention center, then we had to accept it because it was the government's," Mrs. Hà told me, "We *have to* accept it!" Peoples' reluctance to undergo negotiations with government developers likely results from their fear of the consequences of dealing with unpredictable government officials, as well as their general understanding that government projects were meant to serve public "socio-economic purposes" and were thus non-negotiable. Yet, as I will explain shortly, the distinction between government and private projects is often times ambiguous, particularly given the fact that many of the major development conglomerates requiring land (e.g., VinGroup) are State Owned Enterprises (SOE). As a result, in many areas where villagers had transferred land at cheap rates for government projects, government representatives have also resold the land to developers for

non-public commercial purposes. Unsurprisingly, villagers were aggravated to find out later on about the obscurities in public-private land acquisitions.

In many instances, even when villagers did not agree to the compensation offered, land transfer and conversion commenced regardless because villagers felt pressured to accept the terms of the agreement. In the most agreeable scenarios, people described that government representatives and developers met with the disagreeing households with the intention of “persuading” (*thuyết phục*) villagers to take the offering rate. Mrs. Hà suggested that persuasion tactics were relentless such that the developers—whether from the government or private companies— “will do whatever they can to persuade [the villagers]” to accept the compensation so that they can acquire the land use rights. Rather than persuasion, a number of villagers suggested that developers pressured people to sign the land transfer agreements through bribes, and in worse cases, with threats of violence to the social, financial, and physical wellbeing of the villagers. Thus, while agricultural land loss and its conversion into new urban developments did not arouse public dissent in Mễ Trì village, the process of land transfer was sometimes contentious, which therefore explains why Mrs. and Mrs. Huru were initially suspicious about my intentions for asking questions about village land. Mr. Huru warned me, “Right now villagers here are upset (*bức xúc*) on the issue of agricultural land!” When his reservations towards my colleague and I abated during that meeting, Mr. Huru explained to us the situation in more specific details:

Mr. Huru: Just recently, there have been situations where [the developers] were pressuring people [...] they were pressuring villagers [so they can] take farm land (*đất ruộng*). They took an area [of a certain] size from those households, but the land came in two parts; in one part, the village households did not accept the money. They were pressuring these households to take the money [so they can] finish it (the land transfer), in order to free the space up.

While unlawful, bribes and threats are the more benign methods that government authorities and

developers used to pressure accept land transfer agreements. In other instances, villagers, such as Huyền Xuân Long from Mễ Trì Hạ, claim that their land was forcibly and violently taken by a third party working for local officials.

Information about Huyền Xuân Long's experiences of losing his land was readily available on the free blogging website as well as his public YouTube channels, where he publishes videos of local town hall meetings under the account "NguoiYeuNuocViet" ("Person who loves Vietnam"), which appears to be a conglomerate account of videos on land conflicts made by several users. Many of Long's videos have been deleted or taken down from this channel since writing this chapter of the dissertation. While not a native resident of Mễ Trì, he has lived in the village for more than two decades and claims to have constructed his home and business from Mễ Trì's dumping ground (*bãi rác*). Mễ Trì ward officials later informed Long's family around the year 2012 that his land would be transferred to VinGroup for a new urban luxury housing project. According to Long, in his blog posts and YouTube videos, he was ready to transfer the land to the developers; however, he alleges that a group of policemen had come to tear down his property without prior notification and before reaching a compensation agreement with him. When invited to meetings with the Ward and District officials regarding his complaints, Long set a camera on the desk in front of him and filmed the reactions of Mễ Trì Ward officials while he described passionately, without interruption, his convictions about losing his land. Below are transcribed and translated snippets of such videos that he posted on the NguoiYeuNuocViet YouTube channel in 2012:

The People's Committee of this rural district used the term, "eviction" ("*cưỡng chế*") and I recommend that you change your use of this term. Here no one is "evicting" anyone but rather, I have to use the term "steal" ("*cướp*")! because the People's Committee came and destroyed [my property], entirely, without any paperwork at all [...] even though no one warned us that those actions would happen [and] there were no signs that mentioned destruction. There was no plan for compensation. There was no reason at all [for doing

this]. (NguoiYeuNuocViet 2012)

As he explains in the quote above, Long's biggest frustration with losing his land was that it occurred without the use of official legal mechanisms. In other words, the government's decision to allow policemen to seize his property serves as evidence that the officials acted unlawfully.

"Cưỡng chế" means that it is proper undertaking (*công vụ*), and if it is a proper undertaking then there would have to be a legal notice. You have to ask us to come (to the People's Committee) to negotiate on "A, B, C;" you have to have a reason, a plan for compensation. Then you have to sit and discuss it with us 1, 2, 3, 4 times, 5, 6, 7 times. At least 1 time! But you cannot say there was ever a negotiation. That is why I call the time of land clearance, "stealing." (NguoiYeuNuocViet 2012)

Long's concerns are important to bring up at length here because they point to a sentiment that is universally shared by villagers regarding the contentious role of state actors in the process of land use transformation. Corrupt state actions often fuel village discontent, rather than the loss land itself.

In other videos that Long posts on YouTube, he calls the group of policemen as "mafia" or "black society" (*xã hội đen*) who he contends secretly work for local Ward and District officials. "You representatives of the government, you must accept this issue: this is [the work of] mafia in the center of Hanoi!" Long proclaims to the blank stares of the village officials sitting in front of him, "you know that their actions are illegal, you know it and you would take them down. But you don't!" (NguoiYeuNuocViet 2012). Long's theory has some validity as there is plenty of evidence to show that such collusions are happening in other places around the country. In Vietnam, when rural land transfers do not occur through market transactions between a willing buyer and willing seller, the state will intervene through "extra-economic" methods, which typically involves some form of force and coercion (Levien 2013). Increasingly, as a means of speeding up the land transfer process, Vietnamese local officials often hire an eviction team of both state and non-state actors

to coercively remove villagers from the land. This team allegedly consists of the *xã hội đen* (black mafia), more commonly known as “*đầu gấu*” mobsters—typically young men in their twenties, hired to intimidate and harass villagers.⁵⁷ Despite the fact that villagers are aware that “mobsters” represent the government, state officials are often able to evade accusations regarding their involvement in such violent incidences, and even intervene to become legal mediators of land-related conflicts.

Corruption in the district and provincial administration is a major source of discontent and conflict for rural residents. At the federal level, high-ranking officials are sometimes receptive to the complaints of villagers regarding corruptive land transfer actions, particularly in those cases where widespread media coverage of land conflicts may threaten the legitimacy of the Party. In various incidences of land conflict, the state will act as a conflict mediator by publicly denouncing local authorities for their corrupt behavior. In some cases, the state may also intervene in land conflicts as a legal representative of dispossessed rural peoples. John Gillespie, (2014) who has conducted long-term research on legal issues in Vietnam, argues that for some cases of land conflict in which the local administration, investors and rural residents are unable to come to an agreement about the terms of dispossession and/or “fair” compensation, state officials emerge as “hybrid actors...who mediate disputes in multiple epistemic settings both within and beyond the state orbit” (293). Conversant in the juridical language but also sympathetic to the concerns of local villagers, these hybrid regulators draw on both the law as well as village traditions to produce a hybrid framework for resolving disputes⁵⁸ (Ibid, 301). In other words, Gillespie suggests that,

⁵⁷ Speaking to BBC News Vietnam after a land clearance incident in a peri-urban district of Hanoi, a local resident of the cleared area noted that, “the ‘black society’ are miscellaneous people from the outside. They are not the police so they can avoid punishment, the police just tell them what to do...nowadays [officials] just stand in the back and push [the black mafia] to the front [of the action]” (BBC Tieng Viet 2014).

⁵⁸ In one case study of land conflict over the construction of a factory in Thái Bình province,

while hybrid actors use the Land Law uncritically to resolve the dispute, state-society relations and national policy decisions can sometimes be "dialogical"—the state is receptive to the concerns of the citizenry under certain circumstances and through the mediation of well-connected political actors (Kerkvliet 2005).

However, the majority of cases in Mễ Trì, even Long's, did not receive enough public attention to require support from state actors in mediating and representing their concerns; villagers were discontented with the experience of losing their land primarily because they felt as though the officials were not acting in the best interests of Mễ Trì people. When state officials were not around, even decades after losing their land, villagers continue to grumble amongst themselves about corrupt Ward and District-level cadres. Such whispered complaints suggest that the villagers lost out on potentially higher compensation because the officials had embezzled and deluded them. For example, when government developers had taken land to build the National Convention Center in the early 2000s, villagers transferred their fields expecting one hundred percent of the land would be used for public buildings. Yet, later on, they were frustrated to hear that officials had alternate plans with the land:

Mr. Hồng: They cheated the villagers, do you understand? In reality the area of the National Convention Center is 1000 m², for example, but they took 2000 m² altogether and divided between each other, divided all of it—deluded the villagers.

Mrs. Hà: They deluded the villagers!

Mr. Hồng: Meaning that for the one project [where they were] taking land here, for example, then in reality they only use 1000 square meters to build the National Convention Center. But afterwards, they took [the rest] to build a hotel. They did all of that and the

Gillespie describes how a retired state official intervened by translating idiosyncratic local grievances into technical and bureaucratic terms and urged provincial officials to follow their moral imperative as Party members to help the poor by increasing the compensation package on the acquired land. While villagers in Thái Bình were unable to achieve their objective of retaining ancestral land, the hybrid regulator's intervention was successful in negotiating a higher compensation rate as well as in securing work opportunities for displaced residents in the factory.

villagers thought [the National Convention Center] would go in that area, how would the villagers know?

Hoa: They didn't know that they would build the hotel. They only knew that they would build this (The National Convention Center).
[...]

Hồng: Now there is the [Hanoi] museum, the Planning Museum (the Urban Planning Exhibition Hall), the Marriott Hotel... they made three to four projects there.

Emily: Then what did they tell you? Did they tell you that now there is a project building the National Convention Center and that is it?

Mr. Hồng and Ms. Hà: That's right.

Mrs. Hà: When they took it, they told us that they would make the National Convention Center, they met with the villagers and it was just that.

Mr. Hồng: Now what are we supposed to do, they have separated it and sold it to build the Hanoi Museum, the Planning Museum, and the Marriott Hotel.

Mrs. Hà: This proves that they sold it and there is nothing left, meaning that they did make the National Convention Center. It was 1000 m². But the other 1000m² they sold to the hotel, they made a plan for it to build something else. Then the villagers didn't know about it, and so they had to accept the compensation.

In other words, Mrs. Hà and Mr. Hồng claim that the government developers had acquired more land than necessary to build the project as a means of embezzling funds from the remaining land. In the end, they were able to sell the extra 1000 m² to private developers at higher rates than what the villagers had been compensated.⁵⁹

Mrs. Hà and Mr. Hồng were not the only villagers to accuse government authorities of deluding them for financial benefits. Government corruption in the process of land transfer and development was common knowledge among villagers in Mễ Trì, as well as in Hanoi at-large. In

⁵⁹ As Harms (2016a) has shown that in Thủ Thiêm, when local residents that had similar experiences with government officials embezzling land, the locals referred to financial calculations to express their feelings of injustice. He noted that the numbers were “used to justify accusations of corruption, for which the evidence is less clear but made to sound convincing by the force of the calculation” (Harms 2016a, 204)

Mễ Trì, many people were frustrated with the lack of transparency in government land use practices:

Mrs. Hưu: We can't possibly know what the people are doing. At one time, they say that they are building a house to rent, another time they say that there is a project for making a television broadcasting station. In reality, we don't understand what they do when they take it

Moreover, villagers felt that government officials could get away with corruption because they were not following any protocols for ensuring that transparency. As Bác Tùng describes below, villagers were not given access to land transfer documents after signing the agreements:

Ngọc, colleague at USSH: I see. But in your case, are you allowed to keep a copy of the paperwork for yourself?

Bác Tùng: No.

Ngọc: So, you just sign it and that's it?

Bác Tùng: No, no. For example, I have 5 *sào* but they will take 1 *sào* each time, not all at once.

Ngọc: I see. But I mean, for every part of your land, you will sign the paper then do they give you a copy?

Bác Tùng: No, no.

Ngọc: So, all the papers, the officials keep them for themselves?

Bác Tùng: They keep them for themselves.

Ngọc: So, now you don't have any proofs on your land being confiscated?

Bác Tùng: No, nobody has it.

Allegations regarding lack of transparency, delusion and embezzlement also point to the fact that villagers were not just upset about corruption itself, but what such corrupt actions implied about their relations with government officials. For Mễ Trì villagers, injustice was not merely a matter of fair compensation, but it was also about whether or not government officials respected the

dignity of villagers. Their grievances about corruption suggests that they resented being treated as ignorant pawns of government money-making schemes.

Nevertheless, while such ongoing discontent and frustration with government collusions festers among villagers who have experienced the loss of their agricultural land, these sentiments are not enough to prompt the kind of public indignation and protest Long broadcasted in his videos on YouTube. Villagers' discontent towards the corrupt actions of local officials is constitutive of the long and gradual process of land use change; over time, these grumblings have turned into general feelings of annoyance, which villagers occasionally bring up in describing their experiences of losing their land. On the other hand, more public acts of resistance seem to occur in those rare radical moments of accumulation (akin to those described by Levien 2013), where land is taken so suddenly from villagers that they do not have the time to adapt to such changes—through boarding home investments, temporary gardening, and other actions that allow them to transition from their previous livelihoods. As Long mentions in his monologue in front of the Mễ Trì officials at the People's Committee conference room in the video clip that he uploaded onto YouTube, the district came and cleared his land without prior notification or any opportunities to discuss the terms of the land transfer; these formalities would have given him time to plan for his own transition and move from the area. In other words, frustration appears to transform into resistance when villagers such as Long are not provided the chance to adapt on their terms; resistance arises when villagers do not have the means to be “resilient.”

5.6: A Politics of Resilience

The presence of discontented feelings among villagers, which was triggered by the experience of losing their land, still raises questions about the larger political significance of

village practices responding to such circumstances. Do *cóm* production, boarding houses, and makeshift gardens constitute acts of (everyday) resistance to capital driven and urban-oriented land use changes? Mễ Trì's adaptive practices could arguably be examples of what James Scott (1985) calls "everyday forms of resistance," which are the ostensibly prosaic but transformative activities responding to situations of exploitation and oppression, including: "foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so on" (Scott 1985, xvi). Benedict Kerkvliet (2005) has shown that the everyday actions of farmers in North Vietnam were once instrumental to the dissolution of socialist policies of collective agricultural production during the late 1970s/early 1980s. Kerkvliet's social-historical application of Scott's framework points to the ways in which powerful practices of resistance can occur in the spaces of everyday life, particularly when draconian policies against dissidents prevent the powerless from openly condemning an oppressive regime. One could then imagine that under similarly repressive political contexts, villagers in Mễ Trì may engage in covert and quotidian forms of resistance. Yet, the concept of everyday resistance, like other forms of resistance, insinuates that such actions always have a broader revolutionary objective, of deliberately dismantling the structures that cause oppression and discontent (Dousset and Nayral 2019, 6). Since village responses to land dispossession and urban development in Mễ Trì do not strive to impede such processes, but only to alter its temporality and socio-cultural effects,⁶⁰ "resistance" may not accurately describe what is happening.

While resistance frameworks explain actions that oppose or revert particular forces of

⁶⁰ By which, I am referring to Mễ Trì's endeavor to attain alternate post-agrarian livelihood options, as well as a particular symbolic status and identity as craft-makers in the context of Hanoi's urban economy.

adverse change, the concept of “resilience” accounts for the participative actions of local actors in the transformation of their social and material realities. Writing on the differences between theories of resistance and theories of resilience, Dousset & Nayral (ibid) note:

resistance implies individual practices aimed against an existing ‘system’, resilience, quite the opposite, is considered to refer to entire sets of complex relationships which attempt to reproduce the system or regain some kind of stability. Resistance drives for change. Resilience attempts to counterbalance change. (9)

At first glance, the use of resilience in studying social change may incite accusations of structuralism, which see “resilient practices” as examples of what Marshall Sahlins calls “structures of conjunctures”—actions that merely reproduce existing sociocultural categories in response to immediate and novel contingencies (Sahlins 1982). Yet, social scientists who use resiliency approaches, like Dousset and Nayral leave open the possibility for dynamism and unpredictability in their analyses of changing societies. These contemporary theories of social resiliency contend that such practices are resilient because they are participatory and transformative (Lorenz 2013; Voss 2008): they absorb and adapt to the forces of change, with the effect of transforming the (social) systems themselves (Keck and Sackdapolrak 2013, 14). Drawing from Holling’s (1973) non-linear notion of resiliency, such works emphasize the dynamic relationship between stability and transformation, in which resilient actions enable systems to pass through multiple adaptive cycles to reach numerous new “stable” states (Redman 2005, 72). The key point is that resilience allows people to thrive in certain new and changed patterns of existence that are better suited to the demands and opportunities of the present.

Resilience therefore provides a powerful framework for grasping how people adapt to the loss of agricultural land and what happens as a result such practices. Importantly, it regards

adaptation as a major contribution to the transformation of both land and society, which allows elements of the past to persist as part of the adjusted social and material reality, but in fundamentally novel ways. In the case of Mẽ Tri's, as I will explain below, practices of adapting to land loss and urbanization, particularly through *cóm* production, enabled villagers to strengthen their agrarian histories and identities, albeit in the realm of symbols, rather than through productive relations with agricultural land. Yet, as I argued earlier, Mẽ Tri's slow and incremental practices of adjusting to changing circumstances reveals that they were also complicit to the processes that transformed their land and livelihoods. This is because adaptation provides them with resilience to a situation that would have otherwise led to socioeconomic insecurity and marginalization; but at the same time, it enabled land dispossession and urban development to persist. In other words, Mẽ Tri villagers were themselves agents in co-agents both in their own dispossession even while they were resilient in the face of it. On a broader level, Mẽ Tri's resilience encapsulates the way in which urban development seems to manifest in most contexts across the globe: quietly and gradually. Slow and incremental practices of transforming land and adapting livelihoods to new contexts allows those affected by land dispossession to avoid violent confrontation with government authorities and urban developers. Nevertheless, even while resilient practices are acquiescent to processes of land use transformation, this does not mean that such actions did not have broader-reaching political impacts.

Unlike the politics of resistance, a politics of resilience is one that does not thwart the forces driving land dispossession and urbanization, but rather, it reconfigures the way in which such processes may unfold. Cases of outright resistance and protest (such as seen in Long's YouTube video) seem to arise cases of abrupt change, in which changes in village landscapes occur so suddenly that villagers are not given sufficient time to react. In other

words, in those moments of radical accumulation, the villages' capacity to react with resiliency is undermined and they have no alternative but to respond active resistance—whether this be through insurgent or non-violent protest. In essence, the politics of resilience also appears rest on a moral economy—a pattern of moral rights and expectations— between villagers and new land users. However, unlike Scott's (1976) original theory of moral economy, the conditions of moral justice/injustice do not depend on the landlord, state or developer's respect for the villagers' rights to subsistence (what Scott refers to as the “subsistence ethic”); rather, moral fairness here is defined by the villager's right to be resilient.

Resilient practices encapsulate the intent of Mễ Trì villagers to exercise agency and autonomy over their changed existence— it is a refusal to allow others to determine the kinds of people they will become. This is particularly evident in Mễ Trì, where village members actively modify the public's denigrating meta-narratives about their community (see Chapter 1) through their practices of producing *cóm*. *Cóm* production has enabled Mễ Trì people to develop a self-determined identity for themselves as virtuous agrarian producers-turned-craft makers and protectors of Hanoi heritage. In a sense, *cóm* has become Mễ Trì's safeguard, which works to protect the village against further sociocultural and economic marginalization within Hanoi's new urban master plans. Their identity as producers of Hanoi's heritage craft provides Mễ Trì villagers with the ability to enter into the market economy as semi-independent entrepreneurs; while at the same time, it also provides them with certain privileges to public voicing their grievances with government authorities regarding the loss of rice growing fields. Mễ Trì's practices of adapting to the loss of their agricultural land and livelihoods through *cóm* production, but also through boarding house construction and makeshift gardening, enable

them to demand what Lefebvre (1968) and later, Harvey (2012) describe as a "right to the city."⁶¹ Such activities give villagers "some kind of shaping power [...] over the ways in which [their] cities are made and re-made" (Harvey 2012, 5). Because of their resilient actions, Hanoi's urban landscape is one that is not just filled with commercial shopping malls and luxury villas and apartments, but it also includes *cóm* production, small vegetable gardens, and in situ boarding houses.

5.7 Conclusion:

Feelings of resentment and frustration among villagers towards their experiences of losing farmland and passing it on to new government and private users ultimately did not precipitate actions that challenged the process of land use transformation. In addition to transitioning into *cóm* production as a primary entrepreneurial activity, this chapter has shown that many Mễ Trì villagers have also responded to the loss of the agricultural land by engaging in temporary gardening in vacant spaces next to urban development projects, as well as in situ home construction in the interstices of village homes. Moreover, as village agricultural land passes through the hands of these new users, its meaning, value and material shape has also changed radically. Partly because of the land's altered symbolic and material state, villagers did not necessarily endeavor to reclaim their former rice growing land for the purpose of returning to previous ways of life—prior to the advent of Hanoi's urban master plan.

On the one hand, villagers kept their bitterness towards corrupt government practices to mostly whispered grumblings among themselves that only rarely made it into public blog posts

⁶¹ This "right to the city," represents the collective rights of urban citizens, including those typically marginalized by capitalist accumulation, such as Mễ Trì villagers, to participate in the processes of urbanization.

and community-organized dialogues. Meanwhile, they invested their energies towards developing new ways of participating in the urban economy — as landlords and craft entrepreneurs. Mễ Trì's politics of resilience helps to explain why there are few incidences of open confrontation when villagers lost their agricultural land in the past two decades. It suggests that the villagers' participation in the slow and incremental changes of their land was part of a livelihood as well as political strategy that gave them maneuvering power within Hanoi's larger urban strategies and visions.

Images:



Image 12: Makeshift gardens in the perimeter of Mễ Trì village.



Image 13: Wet rice cultivation next to a soccer field on the edge of Mễ Trì village.

Conclusion:

This dissertation began with a question about the seemingly incongruous rows of rice straw drying along an urban sidewalk in Hanoi. While I did not anticipate it at the start of my fieldwork, this innocent observation about rice straw on the sidewalk would ultimately encapsulate the broader inquiry of my research, on the role of enduring agrarian peoples and practices in Vietnam's urbanizing society. These rows of rice straw appeared again towards the end of fieldwork, except this time, they were used as decoration for Mễ Trì *cốm*'s display booth at the Hanoi Culinary Festival inside of Re-Unification Park in Ba Đình, one of the city's most central districts. Here, urbanite families posed for pictures next to bundles of rice straw and model replicas of the mortar and pestle that *cốm* producers use to flatten rice grains. Behind the booths, Mễ Trì *cốm* producers, dressed in *áo bà ba* and matching brown trousers—traditional *nông dân* (peasant) clothes—shook hands with their urban customers.

Mễ Trì *cốm* producers make their appearance in the city from time-to-time, at festivals and in the busy streets, to sell urban people packets of fresh *cốm* as well the illusory experience of an autumn harvest in the village. In doing so, these producers also affirm their legitimate position in Hanoi's contemporary urban spaces and economy as producers of a regional (and now national) heritage. Yet, at the same time, in contrast to their urban customers on the other side of the sales booth, Mễ Trì producers are accepted as part of Hanoi's urban landscape largely because of their agrarian difference—their enduring symbolic ties to an idyllic countryside that represents Hanoi's regional history of growing rice. Like the rice straws on the cement pavement, these *cốm* producers were warmly welcomed into the city so long as they remained distinctly “agrarian,” that is, differentiated from the rest of the urban sphere and society.

The literature on urban development and land use change has highlighted the socio-

material forces that have led to the exclusion of (mostly agrarian) people from urban spaces (see for example, Harms 2016b; Harms 2013a; Harms 2012a; Hall et al. 2011; Chu 2014; Baviskar 2010; Labbé 2014; Nam 2011). Adding to the latter scholarship as well as studies of informal urban economies (e.g., Ghertner 2011; Rademacher 2009; Roy and Al Sayyid 2003; Roy and Ong 2004), this dissertation provided insight into some of the lesser-known tools and practices that agrarian people use to carve out spaces of (re-)inclusion in the urban setting. As I endeavored to show through the dissertation's five body chapters, craft production provided this formerly agricultural community with a transitional livelihood in a post-agrarian landscape, but more importantly, it also acted as a resource that helped villagers to cultivate their own meaningful identities amidst contemporary urban-oriented shifts. Through the production of *cốm*, landless Mễ Trì farmers drew on their agricultural knowledge and histories to make themselves into successful urban entrepreneurs.

Nevertheless, as my fieldwork in Mễ Trì has also shown, attempts at inclusion have also been marked with enduring marginalization, differentiation and exclusion of Hanoi's former rice-growing villages against the more civilized (*văn minh*) urban center (see Chapter One). Moreover, as producers of Hanoi's agricultural heritage, villagers must now perpetuate certain formulaic ideals about Mễ Trì's agrarian ways of life in order to sustain their relations with urban consumers. The result of this is that the village continues to stand apart from "real" city spaces, such as the adjacent villas or crowded shopping streets in Hanoi's Old Quarter; while Mễ Trì is now an integral part of Hanoi, it is still not completely urban, but continually half-village, half city—*nửa làng nửa phố*. Even in their everyday choices about where to spend leisure time, Mễ Trì villagers were constantly reinforcing the social and spatial divisions between themselves and the new urban territories that surround them. The villagers were ambivalent about the new demands and

possibilities of Mễ Trì's rural-urban transformations: on the one hand, urbanization brought forth increased material benefits; at the same time, these forces deprived them of agricultural land and also made their village spaces into debased and backwards places that require further urban improvements (Li 2007).

Despite the distinctiveness of *côm* production to Mễ Trì village as well as to Hanoi, the producers' histories of land loss and craft village development highlight the profound challenges that they share with rural people everywhere, particularly those whose lives have also been altered by urban development. Mễ Trì's story is one piece of a global identity politics, through which landless farmers worldwide are making demands, not necessarily for land itself, but for dignity in a place that has become hostile to their presence and ways of life. In telling the story of land use change, craft village development, and urban construction in Mễ Trì, this ethnographic project attends specifically to the sociocultural debates on identity and heritage that inform the micro and macro processes of rural-urban transformations. It has shown the persistence of agrarian peoples and practices within a city's economy symbols as well as through local practices of maintaining morality and freedom amidst dizzying social and material change. Moreover, through these narratives, this dissertation has challenged urban teleologies that predict the end of the peasantry (Hobsbawm 1994) by capturing the role of (peri-urban) agrarian histories, people and practices in city development.

Crafted Agrarian Identities: The symbolic economy of heritage production

Mễ Trì's experiences of losing their agricultural land and their various instances of finding agrarian exceptions in their surrounding urban setting demonstrate what I described in Chapter 4 as a symbolic economy of agrarian societies who are living in the midst of mega city development.

The symbolic economy framework is important to the analysis of rural-urban transformations because it highlights the continued importance of agrarian histories and heritage in the process of city development, particularly for those mega-cities that have been built on former agricultural land. My conception of this symbolic economy of agrarian societies in urban spaces draws from Sharon Zukin's analysis of cities as places of consumption, highlighting the relationship between a city's built forms and aesthetic experiences, and the production of its collective cultural identity (Zukin 1995). Zukin argues that a city is not just built on land, labor and capital, "but it also depends on how they manipulate symbolic languages of exclusion and entitlement" such that the "look and feel of cities reflect decisions about what--and who--should be visible and what should not, on concepts of order and disorder, and on uses of aesthetic power" (Zukin 1995, 7). Such an economy is shaped by a city's ability to produce certain infrastructures and cultural objects as symbolic capital, which, borrowing from Bourdieu's interpretation, works to legitimize the social distinction of those (cities) with honor, prestige and recognition.

In the context of global market competition, a city's symbols become important "lingua franca" for determining its comparative economic advantage relative to other globalizing metropolises for receiving foreign investment. In Hanoi, new opulent skyscrapers and commercial shopping centers serve as the city's symbolic capital, showcasing its status as a modern entrepreneurial city. But as shown by the case of Mễ Trì, built forms and objects of heritage also emerge as important symbolic capital in the global market economy, becoming an integral part of a city's curated image for drawing in greater investment and tourism. But in the case of Vietnam's rising capital of Hanoi, the city's symbolic economy of commercial and heritage objects also has important implications for the country's enduring rural-urban dualisms and divisions.

In Hanoi, the state's struggle to make the Vietnamese capital into a leading entrepreneurial

mega-city also collides with a broader public struggle to reconcile with society's changing and increasingly tenuous relations to agrarian land and societies. In this symbolic economy of agrarian societies living in the formerly agricultural regions of Hanoi's urbanizing fringe, villages and states are working together to repackage a number of agrarian-based practices and places as "heritage" (*di sản*), which serve as symbolic capital for various stakeholders of Hanoi's urban changes. As I have demonstrated through the story of Mễ Trì, heritage can be used strategically to harness new market opportunities offered by the global economy, while at the same time, it can be also be used to negotiate with capital's conflicting demands—such as land recovery and the social-spatial exclusion of agrarian societies from new urban areas. Villagers can wield their traditional crafts as leverage against the novel capital forces that have previously razed their agricultural lands and recasted them as producers of un-civility and vice. As a result, these forms of "heritage" enable agrarian peoples to carve out new meaningful roles and places of belonging in Hanoi's urban spaces and the reformed economy.

At the same time, Hanoi's symbolic economy continues to reproduce existing forms of exclusion and entitlement, as elite bureaucrats and entrepreneurs take the lead in determining and engineering the city's symbols. State actors promote policies for celebrating and protecting the city's symbols of "heritage," which help to confirm Hanoi's prominent role as the true center of Vietnamese culture, politics and economy. In the process of accommodating and promoting agrarian-based craft production in the urban economy, Hanoi's elite are also reworking entrenched notions of the rural and urban. State actors and villagers are working together—in a dialogic process—to create exceptional places of belonging for the agrarian to co-exist within the city's urbanizing landscapes and economies. This dissertation has shown that such repackaged forms of heritage have the power to reshape the blueprints of master plans. Nevertheless, the symbolic

economy of agrarian societies in urban spaces does not mean that market forces will spare agrarian peoples of their land and exclude them from urban spaces. Rather, as the narratives from my fieldwork in Mễ Trì suggested, agrarian celebration and exclusion occur simultaneously. Exclusionary urban processes set the conditions that made it possible for agrarian practices and places to become recognized as distinctive, exceptional, features of the expanded metropolis.

Agrarian Dignity

One important underlying theme of this dissertation has been the production of dignity amidst adversity and marginalization. In the 2008 “Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working Rural Areas,” the United Nations has outlined the principles for protecting the entitlements of rural peoples, whereby the conception of dignity takes on a meaning that is equivalent to the notion of human rights. Unsurprisingly, this declaration largely concerns peasants and other agrarian peoples’ rights to the basic privileges shared by all autonomous human subjects under the United Nation’s universal declaration to human rights, such as access to freedom of thought, rights to form and join unions, and rights to access and use natural resources to enjoy adequate living conditions, among others. Yet, as narratives from my fieldwork on *côm* production have shown, agrarian dignity, while abstract and elusive, appears to concern something more meaningful and personal than universal human rights. Importantly, dignity for agrarian peoples appears to be a quest to find spaces of belonging in a changing world. The dissertation has shed light on agrarian peoples’ pursuit of dignity through what anthropologist Sarah Willen (2019) has described as “inhabitable spaces of welcome”; these are “zones of familiarity and comfort, meaning and solidarity in the shadow of laws, policies and practices that are explicitly designed to make certain people and certain groups feel unwelcome” (18).

Dignity is an increasingly important—but often times, unstated—objective for agrarian peoples given that urban development policies have transformed agricultural landscapes into urban spaces that are no longer welcome to their livelihoods and ways of life. In Hanoi, as well as in other urbanizing contexts, the demolition of agricultural land for urban and industrial infrastructures has disenfranchised a large population of peri-urban residents (those living on the outskirts of the city) who can no longer participate in agricultural production. As a result, peri-urban peoples are forced to find work in other non-agricultural industries, where—due to lack of non-agricultural skills—they typically receive the lowest-paying positions. Additionally, as Tania Li has pointed out, since the introduction of markets in smallholder agrarian economies has not generated the necessary and relevant jobs to support those who have been dispossessed of their lands, informal employment outside of capitalism remains prevalent—as a means for overcoming unemployment and for supplementing meager incomes elsewhere (Li 2011). According to Marxist analyses, formerly agrarian peoples who have lost access to their means of production (namely, agricultural land) but yet continue to engage in informal economic activities outside of capitalism, represent society's deviant group of "lumpenproletariats" (see, for example, "Ship of Fools" in Sanyal 2007).

In the urban setting, formerly agrarian peoples are not only marginalized and excluded based on their participation in informal labor, but also because of shifting state and public appraisals of their appearances and culture. In Vietnam, municipal planning strategies that are based on notions of "urban civility" (*văn minh đô thị*) render formerly agricultural people and places as incongruous to the changed landscape because of their enduring agrarian rituals, economies and lifestyles. Under urban master and strategies policies for building urban civility in Hanoi, villages like Mễ Trì, which stand in contrast to new urban residential areas and luxury

townships, have become places that receive substantial criticism and disparagement from the state as well as the public. As shown by the “tragedy of farmers-turned-billionaires” media narrative in Chapter One, these formerly agrarian villages have become seen as places full of unemployed, uneducated and immoral people—they are at risk of becoming society’s real life “lumpenproletariats”.

Chapter One has also shown that Mễ Trì’s formerly agrarian peoples have responded to exclusionary urban material processes and narratives by drawing on their history of growing rice. They have advocated for the maintenance and renewal of certain agrarian-derived village traditions and practices (namely *cốm* production) to counteract the perils and harms of urbanization, suggesting that Mễ Trì’s deep-rooted agrarian ethic of hard work (*chịu khó*) would provide villagers with a moral pathway towards capitalist prosperity. Mễ Trì villagers have drawn on their agrarian histories to develop moral and social identities for themselves as hardworking craft producers which work to refute disparaging public narratives about the village. Given the state’s recognition of Mễ Trì’s *cốm* as a marker of both a national and distinctly Hanoian heritage, *cốm* production has therefore allowed villagers to attain a space of dignity and belonging in the urban sphere. In other words, in producing this heritage craft, Mễ Trì *cốm* producers have also produced an “inhabitable space of welcome” for Mễ Trì in urban spaces, markets and society.

The End of the Peasantry? The resilience of the Vietnamese peasantry

The analyses and arguments that I made in this dissertation implicitly revisited the classic Marxist inquiry about role of agrarian societies in industrialized capitalist societies, which Kautsky coined over a century ago as the “agrarian question” (1988 [1899]). In its reference to the agrarian question, this research also provided an ethnographic insight into Vietnam’s post-Đổi Mới society

and economy. Kautsky's defines the agrarian question is "whether, and how, capital is seizing hold of agriculture, revolutionising it, making old forms of production and property untenable and creating the necessity for new ones" (ibid 12). Scholars of agrarian societies have continued to investigate this question into the 21st Century, tracking the transition of smallholder production into industrial and urban economies, and debating on whether agriculture has dissolved or under capitalist relations of production (Akram-Lodhi 2010a; Akram-Lodhi 2010b; Bernstein 2006; Byres 2010; McMichael 2006). The agrarian question has emerged in my examination of Mễ Trì village, given that capital-driven real estate development and urban expansion has led villagers to lose much of their former rice-growing fields and on-farm livelihoods—reflecting a process that Bryceson has termed in her scholarship as a de-agrarianization (Bryceson 1996, 99). Mễ Trì villagers themselves have confirmed that agricultural land, or what they perceive as "*đất ruộng*" and "*cánh đồng*" no longer exists in contemporary village spaces (see Chapter Five). Yet, even with the loss of their rice growing land, remnants of agriculture continue to re-appear in the village—as makeshift gardens alongside of busy highways, as part of the village moral ethos of hard work, and in circulation of heritage (products and symbols) within the city of Hanoi.

Because of these recurring agrarian values and practices, this dissertation has challenged the neo-Marxist prediction that urbanization and industrialization will ultimately lead to the death of the peasantry in modern capitalist societies (Hobsbawm 1994). Bernstein (2000) has argued that Hobsbawm's prediction was concerned with a particular "peasantry" that no longer exists in today's global context, noting that the "peasantry (or better, peasantries) that inhabited the 'world of the past' (the greater and lesser agrarian formations of pre-capitalist eras) are indeed destroyed by capitalism and imperialism" (Bernstein 2001, 45). His argument suggests that the death of the peasantry is not only an irrelevant prognosis for today's agrarian societies, but

that capitalism has also produced another kind of “peasantry” in the present world. Bennike et al. (2020) have also pointed out that these Marxist inquiries may need to be revised to make sense of present-day conditions, given that “contemporary rurality is shaped by non-farm activities, the flexibilisation and feminisation of rural work, rural–urban interactions and migration and remittances” (43). These insights are applicable to the context of contemporary Vietnam, as Vietnamese agrarian peoples are now engaged in multiple forms of employment outside of subsistence agriculture and have become integrated into the circuits of global capitalism.

In the “world of the present” in Vietnam, those who engage in agricultural production must contend with intermixed capitalist principles and socialist forms of governance; under such conditions, they may find that authoritarian state institutions are sometimes sympathetic to the needs of agrarian people. As the story of Mễ Trì’s craft production has shown in this dissertation, socialist state actors have worked together with landless villagers in bringing agrarian symbols, histories and practices into the urban market economy as symbolic capital. My observations about Mễ Trì peoples’ experiences of land use change therefore reflect other analyses about the role of grassroots actors in post-socialist transformations. For example, Burawoy and Verdery (1999) have contended that the collapse of socialist states and centralized economies in Eastern Europe created space for “micro-worlds” of local struggles and improvisations to influence the shape of the emergent economic, social and political structures in unpredictable ways (Ibid, 2). Schwenkel and Leshkovich (2012) argue that in “late-socialist” countries such as Vietnam (and China), where market reform has redefined (rather than eliminated) the authoritative role of the socialist state, entrenched socialist visions and practices may sometimes oppose neoliberalism, but “these dynamics [also] frequently work to enhance or normalize it” (382). In Vietnam, state actors may relax their authoritarian practices and policies

at times in order to reinforce the country's global image (particularly with regards to human rights issues, see for example Cain 2014 and Kerkvliet 2014) or simply to draw in more capital investment; as a result of this, everyday actors, such as peri-urban peoples, have greater maneuvering power over the broader structures of political economic change.

This is evident in the case of Mễ Trì, where craft production and other practices of adapting to the loss of agricultural land have enabled villagers to actively participate in the transformation of their material and social environments. Firstly, Mễ Trì's emergent heritage industry of *côm* production has provided village producers with a platform for voicing their demands and frustrations with state representatives. As I noted in Chapter Four, state-led projects to promote *côm* as a national heritage product have brought *côm* production into a system of governance and commodification that some scholars have called "heritagization" (Salemink 2012 and 2016). Given the state's interest in protecting heritage for development purposes, Mễ Trì's recognition as an official craft village of Hanoi has given producers greater leverage in voicing their opinions about the issue of agricultural land loss and in making requests for increased state subsidies for their industry. At the same time, *côm* producers still retain prime management over their household-based workshops despite the product's increased commodification (See Chapter Two).

As a craft industry that is still primarily dependent on agricultural cycles and household relations, *côm* production, households who are engaged in *côm* production and sales have maintained ownership over their time, labor, and laboring bodies (their means of production). Consequently, it has also allowed to engage in capitalist forms of exchange on their own terms, without being subordinate to capital in the way the most precarious workers often are. In their perspective, villagers claim that *côm* production has given them "freedom" in the sense that they are able to determine their own time-schedules and work arrangements (Chapter Three). What's

more, by continuing to declare themselves as *nông dân* (farmers) on their official household registration documents, *côm* producers as well as other who participate in such kinds of “*nghề tự do*” freelance work (such as renting out apartments or selling noodles) also effectively limit both state and market forms of management; they are able to prescribe their own roles and responsibilities in the household and village spheres.

In Chapter Five, I have also argued that villagers’ practices of slowly adapting to their changing circumstance—by temporarily using vacant land, building boarding houses and producing com—were also actions that contributed to transformation of their landscapes. These practices worked to delay land conversion while also providing villagers with a secure source of income; consequently, adaptation gave villagers the means to not only negotiate with the terms of land dispossession and urban development but also to determine their own identities and economies amidst such changes. In other words, it made them resilient to a situation that would have otherwise led to socioeconomic insecurity and marginalization. The villagers’ diverse responses to the loss of their land encompass quasi-political actions that I have defined as a politics of resilience. Through this politics of resilience, Mẽ Trì people have not stopped urbanization and land use transformation from occurring in their village, but they have re-shaped the evolution of these processes. Concurrently, villagers have held onto many aspects of their identities and customs as a community that previously engaged in the practice of growing rice. Practices of resilience are not specific to Mẽ Trì village; rather, non-violent compliance and adaptation to land use change may be more prevalent than acts of resistance and protest but resilience may receive less media and scholarly attention (Mamanova 2015).

Agrarian peoples’ practices of being resilient to capital-driven forms of land use change suggests that, even with the loss of agricultural land, the death of the peasantry is nowhere in sight.

Moreover, the story of Mễ Trì demonstrates that agrarian people and practices are playing a strategic role in Hanoi's urban development, contributing to the city's distinctive identity as the center place of both national heritage as well as post-reform entrepreneurialism. By infusing the city with tastes, sounds and spectacles from the (imagined) countryside, and by providing the municipality with a constant stream of labor and products, the agrarian has been essential to the making of Hanoi as the "heroic capital" (*thủ đô anh hùng*) of Vietnam. Agrarian people seem to persist in Vietnamese cities not just in spite of urban modernity but, most importantly, *because* of it. At times, they exist to remind people of Vietnam's enduring struggle to become modern; at others, they embolden the country to develop in its own way—as a rising industrialized nation that is, at the same time, supported by a robust foundation of agrarian culture, knowledge and practices in its past, present and future.

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Annex 1: A Day in the Life of a Cốm Producer⁶²:

At **2 A.M.**, Mrs. Hà is awake and squatting in front of the mortar in her flowered pajamas. Her five retailers are about to come by to pick up their orders, so she has taken out several 5.25 kg plastic bags filled with *cốm* that she stored in the freezer the night before. She pours them into the mortar and turns on the pestle. The harsh thumping sound of wood against stone echoes in the entire courtyard and throughout the alleyways in front of their home. Mrs. Hà sits on the floor to scoop and stir the grains as they pound, to make sure that they flatten evenly. Her retailers come by foot, many of whom live in the same vicinity, and they help Mrs. Hà to re-pack the re-pounded *cốm* into the plastic bags. Their chatter above and between the thumps of the pestle adds to the echoing noise that only startle newcomer residents. As soon as the retailers leave to prepare for the markets, Mrs. Hà can continue resting for a few more hours. However, her phone remains switched on, in case another retailer calls in for extra supplies.

Depending on the distance to the rice growing fields, Mrs. Hà's husband, Mr. Hồng will leave his home on motorbike between **5-8 A.M.** to collect the harvested young rice grains from his providers. In the rice growing village, his providers have already harvested and washed the grains. Mr. Hồng sits down to drink tea and smoke pipe tobacco with the head male of the rice growing household before departing. Later, the women of the family help Mr. Hồng secure the bags of grains onto his motorbike with ropes and clips. Around **7-9 A.M.**, Mr. Hồng returns home. His children, Khoa and Hoa, who are getting ready for work, prepare a breakfast *banh mi* (egg sandwiches) for their parents who quickly eat standing up as they start piling wood underneath the roasters.

Between **9 A.M. and 6 P.M.**, sometimes even **8 or 9 P.M.** on days that they have retrieved high volumes of grains, the couple are moving continuously between the various machines. First, they load the roasters with the washed grains and roast them for 2 hours, checking often to make sure that the grains are not overcooked. Mrs. Hà is usually the one who roasts and inspects the grains. During the first batch of roasting, Mr. Hồng can sit in the courtyard to smoke his pipe and catch up with male neighbors and relatives who stop in for a tea and a smoke. This happens periodically throughout the day in the interim between roasting and grinding and serves as the main resting and socializing period for the male *cốm* producers. Mrs. Hà typically doesn't take a break until lunchtime (she usually scarfs down a bowl of rice with leftover meat and vegetables) or else, when the machines have all powered down. She roasts *cốm* wearing a mask that covers her mouth and neck, a hat for covering her hair, and long sleeves and long pants to protect her arms and legs. The couple wear "clean" sandals, reserved for the production floor when entering the space surrounding the mortar and pestle as no outside shoes are allowed in this space, even for visitors. To check the roasting *cốm*, Mrs. Hà uses a wooden paddle to scoop out grains from the roaster and presses it with her fingers. Three soft and two firm (*già dẻo non quăn*) mark the completion of a roasted batch of *cốm*.

Mrs. Hà switches the power off from the roaster when the grains have finished roasting. She uses a metal pan to scoop the hot grains into rattan baskets and puts the completed batches in front of a fan to cool down. In the meantime, Mr. Hồng turns grinding machine. The grinding

⁶² This "Day in the Life of a *Cốm* producer" was constructed through both participant observation filled in with details from interviews for those parts where I was not present. I was unable to follow Mr. Hồng out to his rice growing fields, therefore, the description of this step was constructed out of participant observation of rice collection with Bác Tùng, supplemented by details provided by Mr. Hồng himself.

machine is the loudest of the machines in the production area, but the low-pitched thumps of the mortar and pestle resonate the furthest and are thus most noticeable to others living in the alleyway. The opening of the grinding machine is at the very top of the apparatus and Mr. Hồng must use a small ladder to pour the grains into receiving vent. He waits for the grains to filter through and pours them back at the top again, repeating several times. Meanwhile, Mrs. Hà adds more wood to the fires underneath the roasters and begins to roast a second batch.

When the grains have been ground to remove the husks and shells, Mr. Hồng places them back into the rattan baskets and Mrs. Hà adds water to moisten the grains before they begin with the pounding. While the second, third, fourth, and sometimes fifth and sixth batches are roasting, Mrs. Hà will begin to pound the grains in the mortar and pestle in small batches, for approximately 5 minutes each. She squats at the mortar and scoops and fearlessly stirs the *cóm* with her right hand between each of the pestle's rhythmic thumps. She moves back and forth between the roasters and the mortar and pestle every few minutes. After the batch of *cóm* has been pounded, she pours small bowls of the *cóm* onto the electric sifter, which resembles a large pulsating strainer-cum-conveyer belt that sieves the *cóm* and removes the smaller bits of dust and straw. She places a rattan basket at the bottom end of the belt, where it deposits the sieved *cóm*. Mr. Hà also moves between this machine and the others to ensure that the grains do not overflow in the basket. In the meantime, Mr. Hồng is continuing to pour the grains into the grinder, dressed in a white tank top and shorts, sweat pouring down his face.

In the late afternoon or early evening, all four to six batches are complete and Mr. Hồng can finally turn off the grinder, while Mrs. Hà puts out the flames underneath the roasters. The production area is silent for a brief moment, until neighbors and retailers come through to taste the day's product. The mortar and pestle and grinders are the only machines still running. Sometimes, Mrs. Hà stirs the grains an additional time with her hands through a rattan tray to make sure that the grains are not sticking to each other. Eventually, she pours the finished grains, one batch at a time, onto a bamboo mat, spread across the production floor, and begins to weigh out 5.25 kg of *cóm* on a scale in green plastic bags, which she later places in the freezer. Her retailers crouch beside her while she weighs the grains, sometimes tasting a few morsels to test the quality. When the grains have been packed and orders arranged for the following early morning receipt, the day is over. It is between 6- 9 PM. All that is left is to do is to clean the production floor. Hoa and her brother, Khoa, have already returned from work and prepared supper.

Occasionally, Mrs. Hà's mother helps to sieve the *cóm*. On the weekends and on days when Khoa and Hoa arrive home early from work, they may also help to pound and sieve the *cóm*. Otherwise, it is usually just Mr. Hồng and Mrs. Hà, sometimes hardly speaking to one another through the noise of the machines.

With their youthful energy and good health (they are both in their mid- to late-forties), Mr. Hồng and Mrs. Hà have succeeded to produce *cóm* in high volumes; they make around 5-6 batches totaling approximately 120 kg of *cóm* a day. "They're workaholics," Hoa occasionally complained, "They never take rest." However, not all households producing *cóm* in Mễ Trì produce at such

high volumes. Those who produce smaller quantities of *cốm*, many of whom are older couples above the age of sixty, such as Bác Tùng and his wife, may finish their workdays earlier and their stocks of *cốm* run empty sooner in the year. Yet, overall, the producers' total capacity for production has grown to such an extent that this once rare ceremonial gift item has transformed into a seasonal but common but artisanal delicacy, an *ăn thực*. "Its almost like a *snack* now!" Hoa explained in English, in an attempt to translate the notion of "*ăn thực*." What Hoa meant was that, in the past, *cốm* was difficult to find except during the Fall on various sidewalks of Hanoi's Old Quarter. Now, people can conveniently access *cốm* year-round, in markets and through Facebook pages that household and retailers use to broadcast their products. *Cốm* is also more common because small amounts of it have been integrated into other popular food items, such as ice cream (*kem cốm*), as well as pork patties (*chả cốm*) that are eaten for lunch with tofu, fresh herbs and noodles.

Given the rising demand for *cốm* in Hanoi's inner core districts, many villagers who no longer produce *cốm* themselves are eager to sell *cốm*, both as a main job and on top of their existing careers. As such, *cốm* producers no longer have to carry large baskets of *cốm* into Hanoi's markets to sell in the morning; instead, each *cốm*-producing household now has at least four to five retailers who re-sell *cốm* in markets and through online delivery services. Some of the retailers are from Vòng village, but the majority are neighbors and relatives of producers in Mễ Trì. The next "day in the life" account focuses on the daily schedule of Cô Liên, Mễ Trì's most well-known *cốm* seller. She is an affable and upbeat recent widow in her sixties, a former *cốm* producer who has been selling *cốm* on Hàng Than Street for over two decades. Unlike other retailers, Cô Liên maintains a designated spot at 39 Hàng Than Street in the Old Quarter of Hanoi. There, customers can reliably find her between 6A.M. and 6P.M. (except a few weeks during and after Tết Holiday) selling Mễ

Tri's *cốm*.

Annex 2: A Day in the Life of a *Cốm* Seller (*Cô Liên*)

At 4:45 A.M., a few roasters near *Cô Liên*'s alleyway are already roasting grains. Producers sometimes like to get a head start if they've collected grains the night before, to prevent the young rice from losing its flavor. The low rhythm of the mortar and pestle pounding *cốm* in *Cô Liên*'s nephew's next-door home is already audible at the head of Ngõ 45 alleyway in Mễ Trì Hạ before the sun has come up. *Cô Liên* and her daughter-in-law, Mai, pack up three large Big C shopping bags with 17 kilograms of *cốm*, all divided into four green plastic bags. *Cô Liên* retrieves finished *cốm* products from two separate producers, who she claims provide the "highest quality" *cốm* in Mễ Trì: her nephew, and a well-regarded, high-volume producer near the communal house in Mễ Trì Hạ. In one of the shopping bags, she packs lotus leaves, a small metal scale, and rice straws for packaging the *cốm*. She and Mai lock the metal gate of their home and squeeze onto *Cô Liên*'s youngest son's motorbike so that he can drive them to the local bus stop located on the busy Mễ Trì boulevard, right in front of The Garden Shopping Center. They take Bus 50, in the direction of Long Biên bridge, without any transfers in between. At 5 A.M., Bus 50 is empty, except for around five people, all women in their fifties and sixties, on their way to the city center to "go to the market"—(*đi chợ*)⁶³. The bus driver and the other patrons are now familiar with each other as they regularly take the same route every morning at the exact same time.

The bus ride takes 45 minutes from Mễ Trì to the Long Biên Bridge, where *Cô Liên* gets off. Bus 50 winds through the main streets of Thanh Xuân, Ba Đình and Hoàn Kiếm districts, as well as the most southern end of West Lake, picking up more people as it reaches the inner regions of the city. At five in the morning, the city is slowly waking up: food vendors are already selling breakfast; men are sipping concentrated black coffee on plastic stools that line the sidewalk; and the elderly are practicing tai chi in matching pajama sets next the lake. Before the Long Biên Bridge, *Cô Liên* hops off the bus, says, "see you tomorrow" to the bus driver and walks about 50 meters to her designated spot at house number 39 Hàng Than. There is a sign hanging on the closed gate of the house front that reads, "*Cốm* Mễ Trì: Lien's *Cốm* Mộc (pure/unadulterated *cốm*). Specializing in: wholesale and retail sales. Fresh *cốm*- dried *cốm* - things made of *cốm*, *cốm* sticky rice (*xôi cốm*). Guaranteed (*đảm bảo*)- Prestigious (*Uy tín*)- Quality (*chất lượng*). 39 Hàng Than, Hà Nội." The sign features a colored picture of *Cô Liên*, sieving *cốm* with a rattan tray, right between a mortar and pestle and a basket full of exceptionally green rice grains.

Cô Liên's customers are mostly regular customers, both individuals buying *cốm* as gifts or altar offerings, as well as restaurants and shops (*nhà hàng*) that make products out of *cốm*. She pre-packages and sets aside supplies of *cốm* to these regular customers and the rest of the *cốm* she sells by the "*lạnh*" (100 grams), which she weighs on the metal scale and wraps into a neat square package with the lotus leaves and rice straws for customers to buy as they pass by. Unlike the other retailers from Vòng village who, she argues, sell "poorer" quality *cốm* for 200k VND a kilogram, *Cô Liên* sells her self-claimed "top quality," pure and unadulterated *cốm* for

⁶³ Going to the market is a phrase that encompasses various forms of selling goods in the open air.

220k VND a kilogram. On the days that her daughter-in-law joins her to sell *cốm*, Mai sits down at the other end of Hàng Than, but without as many regular customers because she has only recently started to go to the market, *đi chợ*. Cô Liên sells to dozens of customers each day, almost year-round, except for a few weeks during and after the Lunar New Year when all the village stores of *cốm* are dry. During the height of the production seasons, she sometimes receives so many orders that her son needs to drive out to refill her supplies of *cốm*.

Cô Liên has been sitting in the same spot to sell *cốm* for 17 years, after a fortuitous *cốm* transaction with the late owner of 39 Hàng Than led to a long-term invitation from the landlord's family allowing her to sell from the steps of the house front, free of charge. This reserved spot off of the sidewalk enables her to make sales without fear of being chased away by the police for being an informal, petty trader (Endres and Leshokowich 2018; Horat 2017; Kim 2015). Moreover, with a regular selling location, Cô Liên is able to retain long-term relationships with her customers who can always depend on her being there during the daytime to sell *cốm*. She believes that, anyone who sits in a designated place to sell something must be careful and consistent, they must also have a "brand name" (*thương hiệu*) so that the customers will remember to come back. Her customers are familiar with her (*quen rồi*) and they trust in her quality. She does not need to call out to people walking around as they come to her on their own, assured about the reputation of her product from the recommendations of others.

Cô Liên's busiest hours are in the early morning between **6 and 9 A.M.**, as people make their way to work. The customers come by foot or they pull over on the curb and shout out their orders, which Cô Liên will deliver directly to their motorbikes. Toward lunchtime, her sales start to slow and Cô Liên requests the noodle shop across the street to bring her a bowl of bún chả (roasted pork and herb noodles), which she eats while waiting for more customers. Some customers will pass by around **4 or 5 P.M.**, on their home from work. **After 6 P.M.**, she will be on her way back home on Bus 50. In the main season, however, when the demand for *cốm* is high, she goes home even earlier because there is nothing left to sell. Back at home, Cô Liên continues to receive phone calls from customers pre-ordering *cốm* for the next day, which she coordinates with her *cốm* providers to pick up in the early morning or that same night.

Cô Liên represents what I call a traditional *cốm* retailer, a local woman who has retained the same retailing techniques that she used in her earlier days of selling *cốm* at markets and on the streets of Hanoi. She is accustomed to engaging with customers face-to-face and is able to draw from her knowledge of *cốm* production processes to make sales. Most retailers who still "go to the market" like Cô Liên are women who are in the late thirties to sixties. Increasingly, Mễ Trì of young brides and children of *cốm* producers have become online retailers and are able to reach customers on Facebook through their large social network of friends and acquaintances. By running Facebook pages or by posting advertisements on their personal newsfeeds, these youth

sell small amounts of *cốm* in between schoolwork or their other jobs. Sometimes, their posts can receive hundreds, even thousands of “likes,” as well as dozens of comments. These public reactions later lead to real transactions that the seller and customer organize through private Facebook messages. The *cốm* retailers schedule deliveries through a third mobile application, GrabBike, which assigns a courier to retrieve the *cốm* at the gate of the retailer’s home and complete the transaction by shipping the product directly to the location of the customer. By maintaining a frequent online presence and personal exchanges with their customers, these young retailers can reach office workers who do not have the time to find *cốm* in the streets of Hanoi. What’s more, unlike Cô Liên, these retailers are able to reach customers beyond the vicinity of Hanoi, and sometimes, even Vietnam.

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